

Spreading the embroidered quilt  
She works the livelong night,  
As if the quilt her poet were  
    Of her bereaved plight.  
Many a joy and many a sorrow  
    Is written on its breast;  
The story of Rupa's life is there,  
Line by line expressed.

From poet Jasimuddin's *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*.



Niaz Zaman

*The Art of*

**KANTHA** Embroidery



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# *The Art of* **KANTHA** *Embroidery*



Niaz Zaman

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Picture on page 14 of wall-hanging by Surayia Rahman based on *Nakshi Kantha* with verses from the poem is courtesy C. Stevulak

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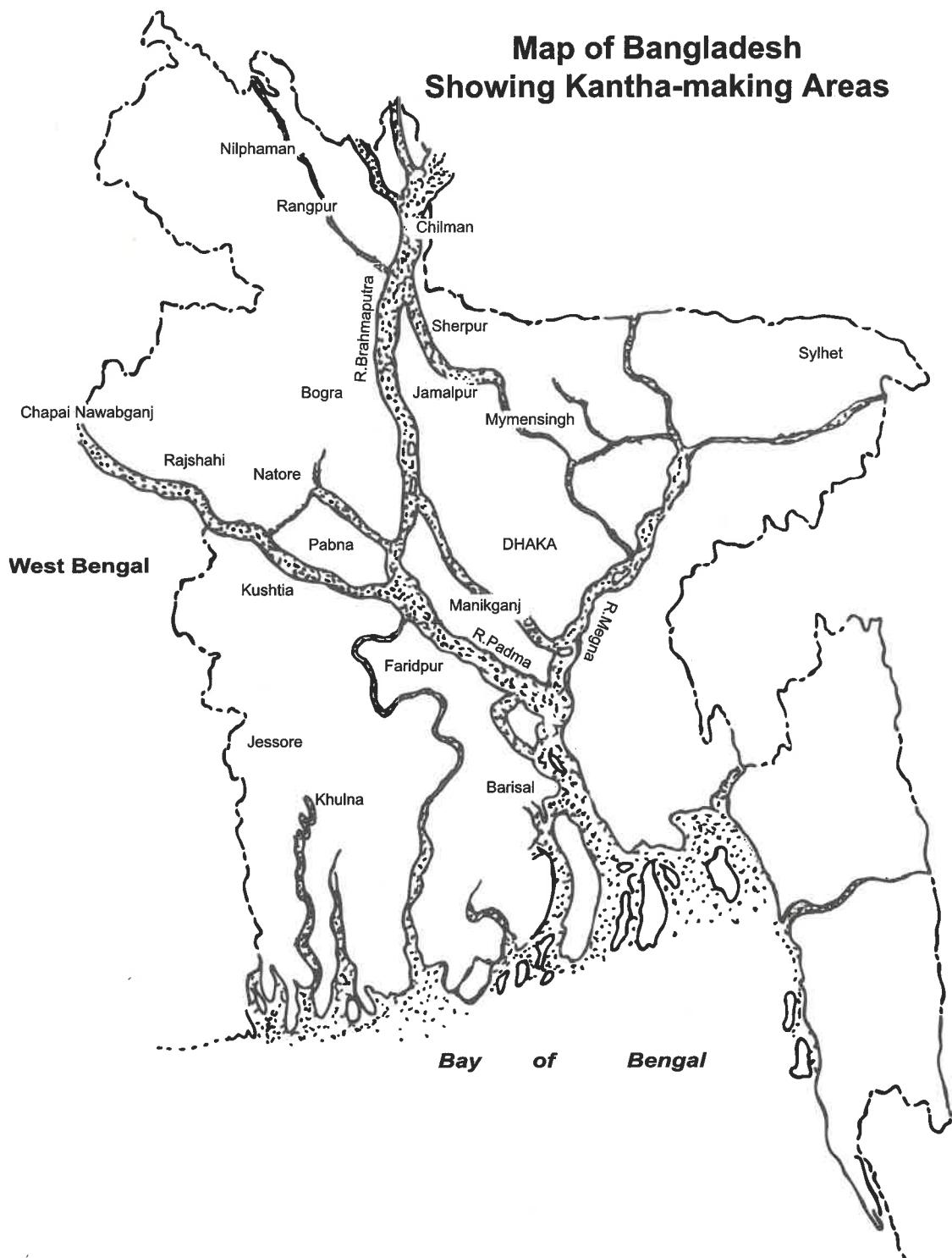
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To  
*The women of Bangladesh  
without whom this book  
would never have been*

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Map of Bangladesh  
Showing Kantha-making Areas

## Preface to the Third Edition

In 1976, a chance remark by my sister-in-law, Mrs. Zebunnessa Majid, aroused my interest in kanthas. While I had been fascinated by Jasim Uddin's poem, *Nakshi Kantha Maath*, or, as E. M. Milford translates it, *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*, I had not seen an embroidered quilt of the type Jasim Uddin had described. True, I had seen kanthas made of red *salu*, embroidered in large cross stitch, and, because I was fortunate to have a friend who came from Rajshahi, had also seen *lohorī* kanthas. However, in order to see the type of kantha that had inspired Jasim Uddin, I had to go to the Dhaka Museum, still located at Nimtali at the time, and request the Curator, Dr. Enamul Haque, to let me see the kanthas locked in boxes for want of space.

Today one does not have to try as hard to see kanthas—though, unfortunately, the finest pieces are still locked in boxes. Handicraft shops offer kanthas for sale, television programmes utilize kanthas as backdrops or counterpanes in bedroom scenes, ministerial offices, conference rooms, hotel lobbies use kanthas to give an authentic Bangladeshi touch. Emerging from the private, inner recesses of homes and locked boxes, kanthas have invaded public space. To what do we owe this resurgence? A number of factors were perhaps responsible: a sense of national identity and the emergence worldwide of interest in ethnic art. The catalyst, however, seemed to be the commissioning of large pieces for a new five-star hotel in the mid-eighties.

It was shortly after the first edition of this book that the kantha revival took place. However, the kantha also changed, producing hybrid forms which kantha *aficionados* would not refer to as kantha. However, these forms have been influenced by the kantha and are, in turn, influencing kanthas. It is therefore interesting that whereas in the first

edition I spoke of kanthas as belonging to the past, in the second edition, even as I talked of the kantha being a living art form, I talked of changes that were taking place. By the time I started working on the second edition, there were so many kanthas being made that a saturation point seemed to have been reached. An associate of a handicrafts outlet commented, "Everyone in Bangladesh who is interested in kanthas already has a couple of them. What do the 5,000 women trained in kantha-making do?" Similarly, kantha-makers at another organization mourned that there were no more demands for large kanthas and therefore no work for them.

However, such prognostications have proved unnecessarily gloomy. Celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, Aarong arranged a kantha exhibition, *Story of Stitches*, July 15-29, 2008 at the Shilpakala Academy. Several old pieces were displayed there as were replicas from museums, including Shri Hiralal Bandopadhyay's exquisite piece from the Stella Kramrisch Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—a photograph of which was also used for the digital banner. New kanthas were also designed for the exhibition, including saris, bed covers, wall hangings, cushion covers, etc. In the process, Aarong proved that the kantha is not dead but that it still forms a valuable resource to be mined.

Today, kanthas have become integrated into our cultural life. Though shoddy pieces as well as hybrid forms may continue to flood the handicrafts market, a few exquisite pieces will continue to be produced, pieces that might well rival museum acquisitions. And, as one of the most recognizable forms of Bangladeshi embroidery, kantha work is being used to embellish both personal wear and interior decor.

This revised edition includes almost all the material that was included in the earlier ones, with some corrections and additions. I have also included some additional pictures of kanthas.

There are innumerable people whom I must thank, people without whom the revised edition—and this one—would not have been possible. There is, first of all, Lala Rukh who invited me to speak at the ECOTA workshop, and thereby

reawakened an interest that absence from the country had made dormant—particularly as so much had happened to the kantha in the years I had been away. I would also like to thank Sayyada R. Ghuznavi, Hameeda Hossain and Razia Quadir for filling me in on all that took place during the years I was out of the country. To Mr. Tofail Ahmed and Mohammad Sayeedur—both of whom have since passed away—I owe a debt of gratitude for sharing their knowledge of what had been, for both of them, a life-long vocation. Mohammad Sayeedur, especially, showed me the details in kanthas and how to describe them. His knowledge was immense. There is perhaps no one in Bangladesh today who equals the knowledge he had. I would like to record my gratitude also to Surayia Rahman for discussing her work. I also thank the workers at Kumudini, BRAC, and Skill Development for Underprivileged Women—which has since shut down—for their patience in answering questions. Subsequently, I spoke to women working at Banchte Shikha Haste Shilpa, women at Rashimpur, the women at St. Paul's Sewing Centre, Shelabunia, and Runa and Sabina of Chapai Nawabganj. I thank them all for their hospitality and kindness. I would also like to thank Father Giovanni—who has since passed away—for driving me from Jessore to Khulna, for hosting me at his mission, and introducing me to the women at St. Paul's Sewing Centre.

I owe a special thanks to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for allowing me to study kanthas in their collection and inviting me to write an entry for the catalogue celebrating the acquisition of a new kantha collection. Working on kantha inscriptions for the catalogue gave me new insights into the world of the women who embroidered these pieces for themselves or their loved ones.

For permission to photograph kanthas in their collections, I would like to thank the Bangladesh National Museum, Mrs. Jahanara Abedin, Kumudini, SDUW, the Bangla Academy, Mr. Tofail Ahmed, Dr. Parveen Rashid, Professor Zahurul Huque, Mrs. Rokeya Kabir, Indian National Museum, Gurusaday Museum, Banchte Shekha Haste Shilpa, St. Paul's Sewing Centre, Shelabunia. Kantha photographs were also provided by Adcomm and Swapan

Saha. Cathy Stevulak, who is working on Surayia Rahman's work, kindly permitted me to include a photograph of Surayia Rahman's wall-hanging based on Jasim Uddin's *Nakshi Kantha Maath*.

I wish also to express my gratitude to my late husband, Qazi Siddiquzzaman, who carefully guarded my notes and files all the years I was away from the country. It is true he managed to lose my desk, but he was careful to preserve all the scraps of paper in it. How necessary these were only I know.

I owe a very special debt of gratitude to Mrs. Joya Pati of Kumudini for supporting the revised second edition in various ways. Without her support, the revision would perhaps not have materialized. I thank her once again.

Above all, to Mr. Mohiuddin Ahmed for being my publisher, friend, and guide through all these years, my deepest gratitude.

Niaz Zaman

## Introduction

In 1981 a new five-star hotel was opened in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The name chosen for the hotel was Sonargaon—the Golden Village—a name which harkened back to the golden past of Bengal when the granaries were full of paddy and the ponds full of fish. The days of golden Bengal were long over. Floods, famine, food shortages, dependence on external aid had become the rule rather than the exception long before the hotel was planned. But, in its plan and conception, the hotel symbolized and embodied the best that Golden Bengal could offer. It was, therefore, only in order, that the decoration pieces that were to furnish the hotel should be truly indigenous. And what could be more representative than the kantha, or the embroidered quilt of Bengal? Therefore, when the hotel opened, across its lobby wall and in the foyer were proudly displayed specially commissioned kanthas. Newly made, they yet represented an old tradition, a tradition that had almost been forgotten, and was made new again by this proud display.

It is true that kanthas and kantha-making were never dead. Every poor woman in the villages and towns of Bangladesh continued to stitch kanthas as women had in the past—putting together old saris and *lungis* when their initial purpose had been served and the cloth become too frail and worn out through repeated washings to stand up to further wear. Outside the dismal huts in every slum, cotton quilts hung up to air and dry. In most middle-class families as well, kanthas were used instead of light blankets during cool nights. But these were put together with a minimum of needlework and were meant for



Shostir Chinho

private use, not public display. The kind of kantha that Hotel Sonargaon displayed was a thing of the past. Different modes of life and different ideas of aesthetics had caused a fading of interest in indigenous art. The two-hundred-year domination of the Indian subcontinent by the British had led to a substitution of the western for the indigenous, whether it was in language, dress, education, or art. It is not surprising that the revival of interest in indigenous art and culture in Bengal in the early 1920s coincided with the nationalist struggle for independence.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the struggle for independence and the *swadeshi* movement led to the evocation of an Indian identity. It is perhaps not surprising that one of the foremost collectors of folk art was Gurusday Dutt, an Indian Civil Service officer who was also a proponent of the bratachari movement, aimed at creating a sense of national awareness among people.<sup>1</sup>

Deep-seated emotions, however, soon led, as is well-known, to the two-nation theory and the propagation of a Pakistani identity, separate from an Indian one. The attempt at creating a Pakistani identity, however, broke down soon after partition. The proclamation that Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan led to protests in East Pakistan as early as 1948. In 1952, the language struggle reached such an extreme that people in Dhaka broke Section 144—prohibiting the gathering of more than three persons—to demand that Bangla be recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Over the years, the commemorations during February of the Language Movement and the Language martyrs, had inspired a distinctly Bengali cultural awareness that consciously opposed the cultural domination of Pakistan. This awareness led to the adoption of an indigenous art form at February commemorations of the language struggle. The women's art of *alpana* in particular was used to ornament the paths

<sup>1</sup> During the course of his administrative duties, Gurusday Dutt travelled extensively all over Bengal and was able to collect and study many examples of folk art of the region. His collection is housed in the Gurusday Museum. Apart from other folk artifacts, the Museum possesses 201 kanthas. His papers were edited and compiled as *Gurusday Dutt, Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Kolkata: Seagull, 1990).

around the Shaheed Minar, the monument marking the spot where young Bengalis were killed in police firing on February 21, 1952.

While *alpana* art was used almost defiantly in the face of the Pakistani masters who could not appreciate the art of the *alpana*—and hated and feared it as unIslamic, and suggestive of black magic—the art of the kantha was an almost forgotten one. Kanthas had disappeared from public view, so that when people spoke of the *nakshi* kantha, Jasim Uddin's poem, *Nakshi Kantha Maath*, was understood. In 1954, Tofail Ahmed mourned the kantha as a lost art, fated to be remembered because a poet had immortalized it in a poem, rather than as an article of common use. During Pakistan times, Zainul Abedin and Quamrul Hasan attempted to give a rightful place to indigenous art. Quamrul Hasan's attempt materialized in the shape of the Design Centre. But, apathy and neglect allowed the traditional arts of Bangladesh to languish, and, in place of the traditional kantha a hybrid product, locally known as the "carpet" kantha, was made at the East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation project at Chapai Nawabganj. Zainul Abedin, apart from setting up the Art College—subsequently the Institute of Fine Arts and now the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka—also advocated the setting up of a folk art museum and personally collected fine specimens of Jessore kanthas. It was only after liberation, however, that Zainul Abedin's dream of a folk arts museum materialized in the shape of the Folk Art and Crafts Foundation at Sonargaon.

During pre-liberation days, women's associations that encouraged women to develop skills that they could put to marketable use settled for traditional skills such as needlework but not to the special type of needlework that is kantha embroidery. The revival of the kantha could only take place after the sense of national identity created a demand for the truly indigenous to replace the culture that was being discarded. In addition, economic necessity encouraged the development of traditional skills. It was, therefore, a number of factors that encouraged the revival of the kantha, even if somewhat hesitantly and tentatively,

after the emergence of Bangladesh. In "Organising Women's Employment Through Kantha Production," Hameeda Hossain describes how kantha-making was set up soon after Bangladesh became independent. The Liberation War in 1971 had left many women violated, widowed or separated from their families. Attempts to rehabilitate them led, particularly in districts with a strong kantha tradition such as Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur and Rajshahi, to setting up cottage industries and attempting to market kanthas as commercial products.

This attempt to revive kanthas was, however, not immediately successful. The kantha revival took a back seat to the development of jute handicrafts and then, a little later, to the jamdani revival. It was not surprising that one of the first handicrafts to be developed after liberation should have been jute, for example, floor coverings, place mats, and the *shika*—or pot hanger. After all, one of the sore points of the East Pakistani had been that the foreign exchange received through sale of jute had gone to enrich West Pakistan. The initial flurry over jute, however, gradually faded. On the other hand, interest in the kantha, begun on a low key in early 1972—it was, after all, a domestic art, something that belonged to the private, not public sphere—gradually gained momentum. The display in Hotel Sonargaon and exhibitions held in the early eighties revealed the possibilities of the kantha as art form as well as income-generating activity.

The exhibitions and the attractive products at numerous handicraft stores have succeeded in attracting considerable interest both from foreign visitors as well as from Bangladeshis themselves, who are realizing for the first time—as a group—how beautiful kanthas can be. While these kanthas reflect a growing interest in the truly indigenous or ethnic art of Bangladesh, they also reflect the changes in this traditional art. Made of new cloth, made to order, embroidered by several women who have been given strict instructions about thread, colours, stitches, who have been given cloth with motifs and designs traced ready for them to begin sewing, these pieces of tapestry are

very different from old kanthas which were not just spontaneous creations but almost always made of old cotton saris. While kanthas in the past were occasionally meant for ceremonial or ritual uses, most were for everyday use. At the same time, even the humblest of old kanthas shows a playfulness, a readiness to experiment with stitch and motif that is absent in the new kanthas. Nevertheless, the new forms using kantha stitches and motifs drawn from old kanthas can, in the hands of sensitive and creative designers, be both attractive and within the kantha tradition—which was itself open and willing to absorb outside influences.

As the revival of the kantha has been closely linked to the revival of handicrafts, a brief summary of the role played by different organizations is useful. In pre-liberation Bangladesh, East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation—now Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation—had, for several years, run a project in Chapai Nawabganj. This project, however, produced only the hybrid form of kantha locally known as "carpet" kantha. This kantha was embroidered in cross stitch, a non-indigenous stitch. The motifs, however, were indigenous ones, ranging from various floral motifs to local fauna—deer, peacocks, elephants. The cloth, a deep red cloth, locally known as *lal salu*, was the same used for, *sujnis*, embroidered quilts, popular in the Raishahi area, but using small back stitches to embroider geometric, floral, or arabesque, designs.

After 1972, the kantha revival was helped by numerous other organizations which emerged. The first of these organizations was the Bangladesh Handicraft Cooperative Federation with its outlet, Karika. Closely associated with BSCIC, BHCF was, however, also more enterprising and innovative than BSCIC which, like most government enterprises, suffered from various forms of inertia. Hameeda Hossain, Perveen Ahmed, Ruby Ghuznavi, Lila Amirul Islam, who were closely associated with Karika in its initial stages, pulled out the kantha, so to speak, from the closed trunks in which it had so long lain and displayed

it at the outlet. Karika was followed by Aarong—the outlet for the Mennonite Church Council and then for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee—and Kumudini. In 1985 these organizations were followed by Skill Development for Underprivileged Women—or Nakshi Kantha Kendra—and then Arshi. SDUW<sup>2</sup> and Arshi,<sup>3</sup> unlike the other organizations, were wholly devoted to embroidery, which, though not strictly kantha embroidery, had been influenced by it. These organizations were subsequently joined by Aranya.

Because the revival of the kantha has been closely associated with these organizations, certain changes in the tradition of the kantha have been unavoidable. While each of these organizations aims at developing traditional crafts, they are also commercial organizations. The development of a traditional craft is therefore also closely linked with the market. Will it sell? And how much are people willing to pay for it?

As a result of these factors, a tremendous change is taking place in the kantha. Apart from new uses being found for the kantha, there are also changes in design, material and stitching. It is true that the kantha, even originally, served a number of functions. Thus it could be a large-sized wrapper, but it was also used as an *asan* or seating place, a *gilaf* or Quran cover, *bostani* or wrapper for precious garments, an *arshilata* or covering for combs and mirrors, a *balisher oshar* or pillow cover, and a *dastarkhan* or long place-mat to be spread on the floor for dining. However, additional uses are being found for kanthas. Thus kanthas are being used as wall-hangings and curtains. And kantha embroidery is finding its way into cushion covers, ornamental yokes or panels for dresses, *kurtas*, saris, and purses.

Wall-hangings, ranging in size from several feet long to a few inches square, have perhaps, effected the greatest

<sup>2</sup> SDUW no longer exists.

<sup>3</sup> Since January 2007 Arshi has been taken over by the Salesian Sisters, who market work based on Suraiya Rahman's drawings and stitches as Arshi-Salesian, to distinguish it from their own embroidery using long and short stitches.

change in kanthas. Originally, kanthas were meant to be spread. Hence, most kanthas had a central lotus which acted as the focal point of the kantha. The four corner motifs—*kalka* or paisley and *brikshalata* or tree-of-life motifs—all verged on this central motif. The background stitching tended to swirl around each motif, almost moulding the motifs in the process. Today, because kanthas are meant to be hung and viewed frontally, both the design and the stitching have undergone a change. Thus, instead of a centre and four corners, many kanthas have a top and a bottom. Furthermore, as the kantha is designed by an artist or designer and the designs then traced onto the kantha to be given to craftswomen to embroider, the needle is not used to mark out the motifs to be filled. The naive, transparent figures of traditional kanthas were the result of the needlewoman using her needle to embroider the motifs, both the *mahout* and the elephant, for instance. Nowadays, this transparent effect is occasionally deliberately created to suggest an untaught artist. Furthermore, with all the designs being traced onto the cloth, the needlewoman no longer needs to swirl around motifs but fills in the gaps between them. The moulding effect is, therefore, often missing from these kanthas.

One of the most striking differences in background stitching may be seen in the "kanthas" of Arshi and St. Paul's Sewing Centre, Shelabunia. Catering to a western taste—many of the pieces embroidered at these two places are exported to Italy—these nakshi kantha tapestry, as they are called, have eliminated the ripple effect of traditional kanthas. The characteristic kantha stitch is a ripple stitch, created partly because of the pattern of running stitches and partly because the needlewoman did not use an embroidery frame. These "kanthas," however, use the darning stitch and an embroidery frame, thus creating a smooth surface instead of the rippled one created by the kantha stitch. Furthermore, they are embroidered on silk, rather than on cotton. A wide gulf therefore separates them from the traditional kanthas embroidered on old cloth with thread drawn from sari borders. Aarong and Kumudini

have remained closer to traditional kanthas in form and spirit, though even they have been forced to change to cater to the demands of the market, both local and foreign.

It is perhaps a sad truth that our rich tradition could only be revived when a market value was put on it. At the same time it should be borne in mind that the revival of the kantha has benefited thousands of women who would otherwise not have been gainfully employed. In the 1990s BRAC employed 3,000 women at their Kantha Centre in Jamalpur and 2,000 at Jessore. In the mid-1990s, Kumudini estimated that it had trained over 8,000 women since the kantha project began. The figures given at the Aarong exhibition of kanthas in July 2008 were as follows:

Jamalpur	4,512
Jessore	4,026
Kushtia	3,324
Sherpur	3,935

While it is true that our traditional craft is no longer in the hands of the maker but in that of organizations which know what will sell and what will not, it should be remembered that these organizations have the resources and the initiative to turn back to a past when the tradition was alive and well. If the kanthas that these organizations make are well beyond the reach of the common man or woman, it is perhaps to their credit that they have elevated what was valueless, except sentimentally, into invaluable art.

## The Kantha Tradition

Quilting is not unique to Bangladesh. In some form or other it is practised in almost all lands where winters are cool or cold. However, the form that quilting has taken in Bengal is unique, with the indigenous quilt or kantha (pronounced variously *kantha*, *kaentha*, *ketha*, *kheta*) reflecting the blend of several factors that form the cultural identity of this land. Apart from being a functional article, the kantha is also an example of folk art, particularly women's art.

Folk art emerges from a combination of material circumstances and daily needs. Climate, geography and economic factors play their role. Religious beliefs and superstitions guide choice of motifs. These factors are also true of the kantha. Though the winters of Bangladesh are fairly mild, there is a need for some sort of covering. The kantha developed mainly out of this need for a covering for the mild winters of Bengal as well as its cool monsoon nights. The long rainy days gave the women of Bengal the much needed leisure to stitch together the several layers of cloth that make up the kantha. Folk art has always been composed of material most readily available. The area comprising Bangladesh was, from earliest times, a cotton growing and weaving area. Thus the material used was cotton textile, traditionally, old saris, *lungis* or *dhotis* that had been through many washes and become too frail for wear.

Waste has not been part of traditional cultures, and the women of Bengal carefully put away worn-out saris, *dhotis* and *lungis* until enough material had been collected to

make a kantha. The *pars* or borders of old saris were often torn from the saris and rolled up into balls, to be either used as they were for kantha borders or to have their threads drawn to stitch kantha motifs. Then, layering those old pieces of worn-out cloth, the women of Bengal stitched them together with loving care to produce coverlets and wraps. But they also made other objects of functional or devotional use. Putting together smaller scraps of material, they made *asans* for seating honoured guests or for performing *puja*; they made *dastarkhans* to spread on the floor for a dining cloth; they made *arshilatas* to cover mirrors and combs; they made *balisher oshars* to cover pillows to prevent perspiration and hair oil soaking the pillow. But the women of Bengal did not just utilize worn-out material to make articles of daily use; they also used intricate variations of the simple running stitch to embellish those articles with motifs drawn from their rich cultural life to create fine works of art. As Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya comments, "Kantha is an example of a strange contradiction, for here is an object created at an endeavor at thrift by transforming wornout textile that would normally be thrown away, into objects of rare beauty and which have in course of time become legendary."<sup>1</sup>

We do not know when the simple stitches that hold the several layers together turned into the exquisite needlework that marks the kantha. What we do know is that the art of embroidery in India is very old. There are references to needles as far back as the *Rgveda* and garments worn were often embroidered.<sup>2</sup> Megasthenes, writing about the court of Chandragupta, noted that the nobles wore dresses worked in gold adorned with precious stones and also flowered robes of fine muslin.

So excellent was Indian embroidery that the Portuguese commissioned quilts that have come to be known as the Indo-Portuguese quilts that often combined Indian and European motifs. These Bengal embroideries were often described by travellers or mentioned in English trade

<sup>1</sup> Indian Embroidery (New Delhi, 1975), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Abinas Chandra Das, *Rgvedic Culture* (Calcutta, 1925), 212.



Nineteenth-century kantha from Faridpur. Bangladesh National Museum



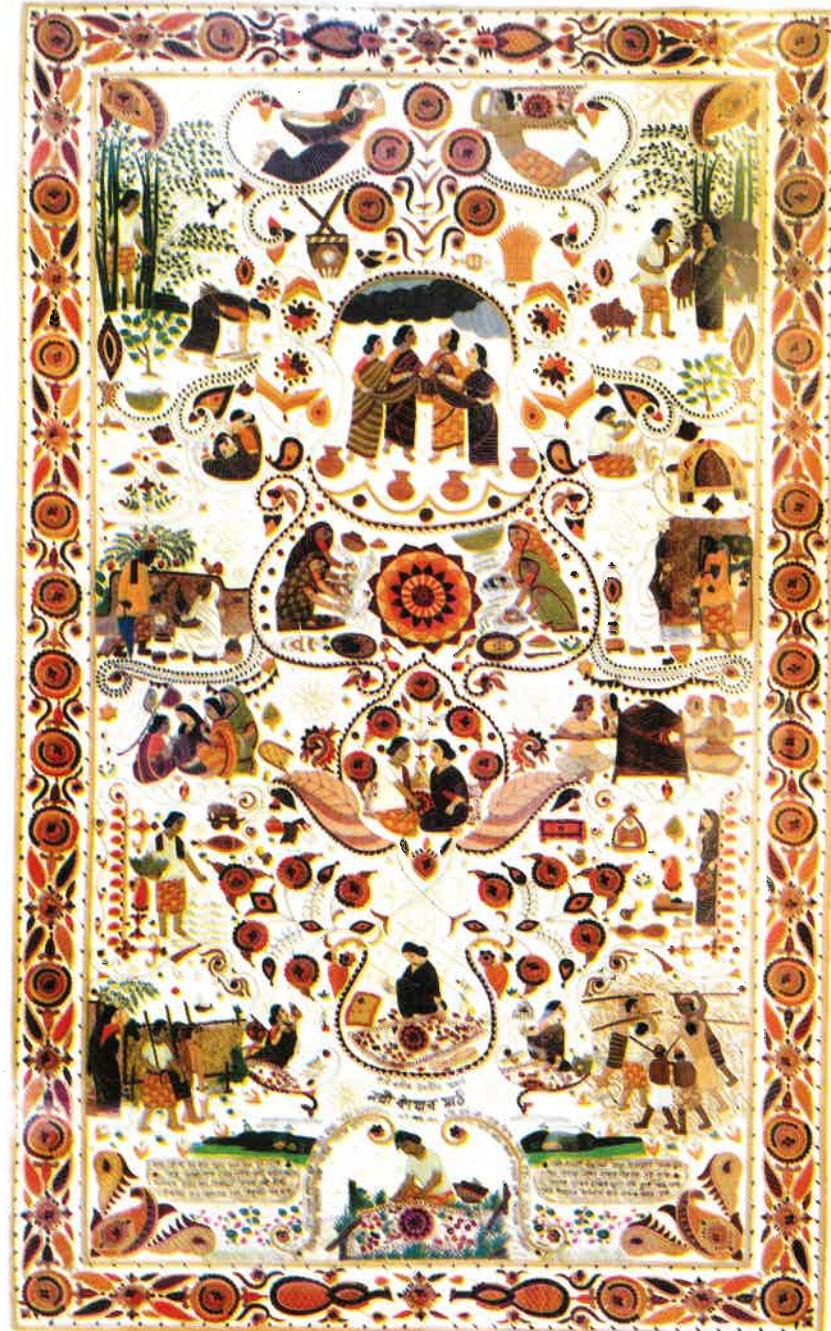
Kantha from Jessor depicting the goddess Lakshmi in the centre flanked by two shrines. Zainul Abedin Collection

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Popular Hotel Sonargaon wall-hanging designed by Surayia Rahman based upon a kantha in the Stella Kramrisch Collection, SK 1994-148-684, Philadelphia Museum of Art



Wall-hanging by Surayia Rahman based on *Nakshi Kanthar Maath* with verses from the poem. Courtesy C. Stevulak

records. Perhaps the earliest reference was in 1516 by Duarte Barbosa who noted, "They have beautiful quilts and testers of beds finely worked and painted and quilted articles of dress."<sup>3</sup> In 1629, Sebastian Manrique, a Portuguese missionary, visited Bengal. In his travel diary he noted, "Among the more important commodities dealt in by the Portuguese in Bengal are very rich back-stitched quilts, bed-hangings, pavilions, and other curious articles worked with hunting-scenes which are made in these kingdoms."<sup>4</sup> It is highly probable that the Indo-Portuguese quilts influenced the Bengal kantha in layout and the *sujni* in stitch craft.

Writing in 1888, George Birdwood praised the quality of Indian embroidery. Describing the embroidery of Bengal, Birdwood referred to Dhaka *chikan* and Dhaka *kashida*, which were in demand throughout India, Persia, Europe, Egypt, and Turkey. Birdwood was, however, talking about embroidery on new cloth, not embroidery on old cloth. The kantha seems to have disappeared from public view during the days of the Raj—though the women of Bengal never stopped stitching it. Whether the kantha was a simple, utilitarian wrap, or a highly embroidered *asan* or *sujni*, it testified to the warmth and love a Bengali woman was capable of as much as to her perceptive vision and artistic skills.

References to kanthas appear in Bengali folklore and fairy tale handed down through generations. However, they associate the kantha with penury. Mohammad Sayeedur, for example, describes how the 12th century legendary Raja Gopichandra accepted a kantha and a *jhola* or bag on becoming an ascetic.

*Napit aniya Raja mastak moraila.  
Golay kheti diya mukhe bhusan charaila.  
Baglay bagli dila singhanad golay.*

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>4</sup> John Irwin and M. Hall, "Indian Embroideries," in *Historic Textiles of India* at the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad Vol. 2 (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1973), 35.

*Chakmaki pather dila batua adhari.  
Ghor meghli dila rasher khapri.*<sup>5</sup>  
[The barber came and shaved the Raja's head.  
Wrapping the Raja's neck with a kantha  
He adorned his throat with jewels.  
Placing a bag in his arms,  
He put a purse with a flintstone in his hand.  
On the Raja's forehead he placed a red sandalwood spot  
And round his waist he wrapped a dark sarong.]

Mohammad Sayeedur points out that Muslim saints, such as Ghazi Pir, Monai Pir, Khizr Pir, Bhola Pir, Chindi Pir also used old cloth and patchwork. In Baul songs as well, the tradition of the kantha finds a place in metaphor and simile.

*Aasmaan jora fakirre bhai.  
Jamin jora ketha  
Eshob fakir morlay paray  
Er kabar hobey kotha rey.*<sup>6</sup>  
[The friend of the fakirs is the sky.  
The friend of the earth is the kantha.  
When these fakirs die  
Where will their graves lie?]

The kantha also figures in some folk stories as a humble article of daily use or as a magical object with fabulous properties. Thus, in the tale of the foolish brother and the clever brother, a kantha is one of the objects that the brothers have in common. While the clever brother has the use of the kantha at night—and therefore can use it to the full—the foolish brother has the use of it during the daytime—and therefore must sun it and occasionally wash it without ever enjoying its comfort. It is only after a wise old man gives the foolish brother some good advice that both brothers share it equally. There is also a variant of this story, with the brothers being replaced by two old women. In the fairy story of *Buddhu Bhutum* as well, a kantha figures prominently. In this story a Monkey Prince and an Owl Prince, named Buddhu and Bhutum respectively, the

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Mohammad Sayeedur Rahman "The Common Ground" in *Woven Air* (London, 1988), 23. Mohammad Sayeedur did not himself use Rahman.

<sup>6</sup> Rahman, "The Common Ground," 24.

youngest sons of a king by his sixth and seventh queens, go in search of a princess. They find her at the bottom of the sea. Like all princesses, she has several tricks to escape marriage, but Buddhu is a clever prince and manages to overcome all difficulties. In the process he also manages to get a kantha with the magical properties of raising an army of soldiers. Needless to say, this army of soldiers helps the two princes get back their rightful share of the throne.<sup>7</sup>

In literature also there are references to the kantha; for example, Kazi Nazrul Islam uses the image of a kantha to describe a winter morning. The land snuggles under a winter mist much as a man snuggles under a kantha.

*Usha didir uthar age uthbo pahar chure  
Dekhbo niche ghumay shahar shiter kantha mure.*<sup>8</sup>  
[I shall awake before the dawn does,  
And from the mountain top  
I shall look down and see the town asleep  
Wrapped in a winter kantha.]

All these references to the kantha are, however, to the humble quilt. In fact, the kantha, as in the case of Raja Gopichandra, was associated with penury. There is well-known Bangla proverb, "Chhira kanthaye shuye, rajprasader swapna dehka." That is, one may sleep on a ragged kantha and dream of a king's palace. In other words, a poor man who possesses a kantha can very well dream of being rich but riches are beyond his grasp. These early references to the kantha do not mention the exquisite embroidery that marks the best kanthas.

Writing in the early 1920's, Girish Chandra Vedantatirtha noted how kanthas were used mainly by poor people, not by the rich: "Samriddha bilashir sahit ihar samparka dekha jaye na."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the first person to recognize the significance of the kantha and its association with the lives of the women

<sup>7</sup> The stories of the old women and the monkey prince are available as "The Story of the Half-Chicken" and "Princess Kalabati and the Monkey Prince" in Niaz Zaman, *Princess Kalabati and Other Tales* (Dhaka, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> "Ghum Jagano Pakhi," *Shrestha Kabita* (Dhaka, 1974), 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Prachin Shilpa Parichay* (Introduction to Ancient Arts and Crafts) (Calcutta, 1972), 32.

of rural Bengal was Jasim Uddin, the poet of the Bengal countryside. In his *Nakshi Kantha Maath*, or *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*, as titled by E. M. Milford, he immortalized the kantha, and succeeded so well that the appellation *nakshi* prefaces the word “kantha” whenever we wish to talk about the quilt. This is particularly when we wish to distinguish it from the humble quilt from which all embroidered quilts originated. Before the kantha revival of the early eighties, Jasim Uddin’s poem had become better known than the article itself. In fact, when the average Bengali spoke of the *nakshi* kantha or heard the term, it was the poem that was referred to or understood, not the quilt so lovingly and painstakingly put together by the women of Bengal. As Tofail Ahmed noted in 1964, with the change in taste and life-styles, the popular craft of the kantha was becoming a lost art. He believed that it would be in Jasim Uddin’s poem alone that the kantha would be preserved. “*Drishtibhangi o paribartaner sange purba Pakistaner e gana shilpa lupta hoye jachhe. Pallikabi Jasimuddiner ‘Nakshi Kantha Maather’ bhitar diye amar thakbe e lupta shilper smriti.*”<sup>10</sup>

Today, with kanthas displayed proudly in lobbies and drawing rooms, with entire sections of handicraft outlets stocked with different kantha items, with exhibitions such as *Story of Stitches*,<sup>11</sup> Tofail Ahmed’s lament seems incongruous. Nevertheless, Jasim Uddin has become, as Ahmed says, inextricably linked with the kantha. In fact, his use of the term “nakshi kantha” has resulted in a change in nomenclature. “Nakshi kantha” has become the name for the kantha in Bangladesh, though the term is being increasingly used in West Bengal as well. It should be noted that most early writers on the kantha used the term “kantha” by itself. Thus Dinesh Chandra Sen, who was perhaps the first person to discuss the artistry of the kantha and devoted three pages to kanthas in *Brihat Banga* in 1935, did not use the term “nakshi kantha.” Stella Kramrisch, the first westerner to discuss the kantha as an art form, was also content to refer to the quilt simply as “kantha.” Gurusaday Dutt, an I.C.S. officer whose travels in Bengal

<sup>10</sup> *Amader Prachin Shilpa* (Dhaka, 1964), 54.

<sup>11</sup> The Aarong Kantha exhibition organized in Dhaka, July 2008.

helped him discover and collect specimens of this art—and later to build the famous collection that is today housed in the Gurusaday Museum at Thakurpukur—also used the term “kantha” in his essay, “The Art of Kantha,” in the *Calcutta Modern Review*. So does Ajit Mookerjee, who includes the kantha as an example of one of the folk arts of Bengal in his book, *The Folk Art of Bengal*.

Jasim Uddin, as he tells us in his essay “*Purba Banglar Nakshi Kantha O Sari*” in *Mashik Mohammadi*, had collected kanthas for Dinesh Chandra Sen. Some of these kanthas were later used by Sen’s colleague to illustrate *Brihat Banga*. Jasim Uddin had also heard the painter Abindranath Tagore’s account of a kantha seen in Sylhet. This kantha had been embroidered by a woman who had begun it as a young bride and had continued to embroider into the kantha all the subsequent incidents that took place in her life. Inspired by the kanthas he had seen, and even more by the kantha he had not seen, Jasim Uddin wrote *Nakshi Kantha Maath* in which the kantha becomes the symbol of Shaju’s life as well as the reflection of the life of every Bengali village woman.

Jasim Uddin’s poem tells the story of young lovers who lived in two different villages. One village was crowded with huts but the other was sparsely populated, and only one or two huts peeped out from among the trees. Between the villages were broad fields of grain, and beside the fields there was a lovely lake on which floated hundred-petaled lotuses. Rupa belonged to one village, Shaju to the other. Shaju was a lovely maiden. Her lips were red, her hair was black, and her skin the colour of golden marigolds. Girls were strictly guarded in the village, especially girls who had no father to protect them. But, despite all restrictions, Rupa and Shaju saw each other and fell in love. They finally got married, but they were not fated to live happily ever after. After a fight, Rupa had to leave the village, and Shaju, during his absence, pined away and died. Rupa came back too late. All that was left of Shaju was the embroidered quilt which she had begun as an unmarried maiden and that she had continued all the days of her life, embroidering into it her joys and her sorrows. She had drawn herself as a happy bride, but she had also drawn her

grave, knowing that without Rupa she might as well be dead.

In *Nakshi Kantha Maath*, Jasim Uddin imaginatively recreated how a village maiden might embroider her kantha. Like other traditional Bengali maidens, Shaju embroiders into the kantha her hopes and fears, her joys and sorrows. She does not speak, but the pictures she draws with her needle tell us all she would.

Spreading the embroidered quilt  
She works the livelong night,  
As if the quilt her poet were  
Of her bereaved plight.  
Many a joy and many a sorrow  
Is written on its breast;  
The story of Rupa's life is there,  
Line by line expressed.<sup>12</sup>

Jasim Uddin describes how Shaju begins the kantha when she is young and happy. She continues to embroider it as she grows older.

She is a daughter beloved at home  
When the embroidery begins,  
Later a husband sits at her side,  
Her red lips hum as she sings.

Shaju's happiness does not last very long. The husband she loves has to flee the village. Shaju sits down with the same quilt, but, instead of scenes of joy, she portrays the sorrowful scenes etched in her memory.

The self-same quilt she opens  
But those days ne'er return.  
Those golden dreams of joy have vanished,  
To ashes grey they burn.

So, added to the picture of their wedding, added to the home of Rupa, she now adds the scene of farewell, draws her husband turning to say goodbye, draws her own dishevelled face.

Stitch by stitch she carefully draws  
The last scene of pain,  
The farewell of Rupa, slowly going,

<sup>12</sup> *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*. Tr. E. M. Milford. Rev. W. McDermott (Dhaka, 1964).

Then turning a little again.  
Turning again to the cottage home,  
At the door his peasant wife  
Standing dishevelled, gazing at him  
Who is going to leave her for life.

Shaju imagines her own death and embroiders a tomb. What Shaju foresees takes place. Rupa returns to find Shaju dead. Shaju could not live without Rupa; Rupa too cannot live without Shaju. Wrapping himself in the quilt that he finds on her grave, he too dies.

Inspired by the quilts of Bengal, Jasim Uddin's *Nakshi Kantha Maath* recreated imaginatively how a Bengali woman might have told the story of her life in the only way open to her. Because Jasim Uddin was a poet, he suggested the complete spontaneity and freedom with which a woman might embroider a kantha. Usually, however, what we see in the old kanthas that have been preserved in museums is a certain generic similarity. As Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya notes in *Handicrafts of India*, while the kantha has limitless designs because the women who embroidered the kanthas could make any innovation they fancied, usually there is a basic traditional design in their work. At the centre of most kanthas, and forming the focal point of the design, is a lotus. In the four corners of the kantha—or in the four corners of the square that contains the lotus—are embroidered tree-of-life motifs that point towards the lotus. In the available spaces are embroidered motifs and symbols drawn from a common stock. Similarly, scenes in kanthas were generally drawn from myths and legends or from the familiar surroundings of these adept needlewomen. Favourite scenes, for example, included depictions of the *rathayatra*, or Durga and Lakshmi, or were drawn from the stories of Radha and Krishna. There were many scenes, however, which the needlewoman recreated from what she had heard—or seen in contemporary prints: entertainers and their clients, hunting scenes, fighting scenes.

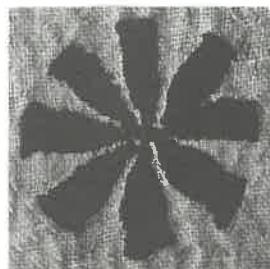
That Jasim Uddin's kantha, while based on the kanthas he had seen or heard of, was a creation of his vivid imagination is also clear from the fact that in Abindranath

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Library

Tagore's account it is not a young unmarried girl like Shaju who begins the kantha but a young bride. Furthermore, Abindranath's young girl was most probably a Hindu woman, but Jasim Uddin's Shaju is buried in a grave. It should also be borne in mind that while it is possible that Muslim women might also embroider figures, most Muslim women would not. Above all, before rural electrification brought electricity to villages, most villagers would rise when the sun rose and retire to sleep shortly after sun set. Kanthas were not sewn in the light of lanterns or *kupis*, oil lamps, but in the light of the sun. Despite this discrepancy—or perhaps Jasim Uddin was using poetic licence here—the poem is a fairly accurate reflection of the intimate relation of Bengali women and the men they loved to the kantha.

After the kantha revival, it was almost inevitable that Jasim Uddin's poem would influence the course of kantha-making and that Shaju's kantha would be replicated in actual embroidery. At Skill Development for Underprivileged Women, the artist Surayia Rahman designed two kanthas that might be Shaju's kantha narrating the story of her life. Scenes from Jasim Uddin's poem illustrate the two pieces, *A Tale of Two Villages* and *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*.<sup>13</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that these two pieces—like the other pieces done by SDUW—are not true kanthas. The material is new silk material rather than cloth taken from old saris or *dhotis*. The stitch too is not the running stitch characteristic of the kantha, but what is called by kantha-makers today the *bhorat phor* or filling stitch. Nevertheless, Surayia Rahman's work has been influenced by the kantha, in particular, Jasim Uddin's poem about the kantha. She has, therefore, returned Jasim Uddin the compliment that he paid the kantha: Jasim Uddin, inspired by the kantha, immortalized the kantha in his poem, and Surayia Rahman, inspired by Jasim Uddin's poem, immortalized his poem in her art. In more ways than one, therefore, the rural poet has become part of the kantha tradition.



Small floral motif in *chatai*

<sup>13</sup> Surayia Rahman has made a number of versions, partly because of copyright issues.

## Old Threads for New

Kanthas were originally made from old cloth, the word deriving from the Sanskrit word for rags: *kantha* (pronounced kontha). A Sanskrit *sloka* suggests the virtue of sewing rags:

*Sanaih kantha  
Sanaih pantha  
Sanaih parvata  
langhanum.*<sup>1</sup>

(Slowly one stitches rags,  
Slowly one traverses the path,  
And slowly one climbs to the top of the mountain.)

Apart from saris, *dhotis*, and *lungis*, in Rajshahi and Chapai Nawabganj *kapa*—the traditional dress of the women of Rajshahi and Rangpur, consisting of two coarse pieces of cloth, one used in *lungi* or sarong fashion, the other worn over the shoulder in *sari palla* or *anchal* fashion<sup>2</sup>—were also used to make kantha. Contemporary, commercial kanthas tend to use new cloth, usually unbleached cotton, but occasionally soft silk. However, in every village of Bangladesh still, every woman who sends her husband or son away to work sends a kantha with him. Wrapped in the kantha, the man far away from home is assured of the love that has gone into transforming the old cloth into an article providing warmth and comfort. There was also traditionally

<sup>1</sup> This *sloka* was given to me by Professor Gouriswar Bhattacharya at the Bengal Arts Conference, February 2003. Unfortunately, he couldn't give me the date.

<sup>2</sup> One of the sketches by the Flemish artist, Francois Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824) shows a "dye" wearing *kapa*. Robert Hargraves of the University of Texas at Austin has edited Balthazar Solvyns, *A Portrait of the Hindus* (2004), but the sketches are also available online: [http://www.aits.utexas.edu/solvyns-project/solvyns\\_online/pages/Calcutta\\_133.html](http://www.aits.utexas.edu/solvyns-project/solvyns_online/pages/Calcutta_133.html)

another type of quilt that used new cloth, red for the top layer and white for the bottom. The inner padding would be of old cloth if the *sujni* was meant for daily use and of cotton batting if it was meant for a bride.

The type of the cloth used for the kantha has often determined kantha type and motif or stitchcraft used. At Rajshahi, for instance, where traditionally the thick *kapa* was used, kanthas tended to be thicker. Of course, it was not only the *kapa* that determined the thickness of the kantha. It was also the type of climate that Rajshahi had, the type of life-style enjoyed by people of the region. Rajshahi suffers extreme heat in summer, extreme cold in winter. People of Rajshahi, like the people of North India, use the *charpai*, a wooden string bed, which can be pulled out into the cool night air. For this string bed, a thick kantha was both cooler than a mattress and more comfortable. On the other hand, a thick kantha was also protection against the extreme winter cold.

The thickness of the kantha has, on its part, also affected the style of embroidery. Fine stitches can be taken where the cloth used is fine and where the several layers of cloth are still soft enough to permit diminutive stitches. The thick Rajshahi kanthas do not permit fine stitching. Nor do they allow for a variety of stitches or motifs. Instead, thick stitches, in repetitive patterns, help create the thick, rigid kanthas that seem more like North-Indian *khes*, than the soft Bengal kanthas.

In addition to these traditional Rajshahi kanthas—called *lohorī* kanthas because of the wave-like (Urdu *lehr*, wave) motif and stitching associated with them—Rajshahi has also been associated with two other types of quilts: the *sujni* and the “carpet” kantha, both of which used new red *salu* for the upper layer. The bottom layer of the *sujni* was white *addhi*, light white cotton material. In between these two layers was a thin padding of cotton. One *pau*, that is about 8 ounces or 250 grams, was sufficient for this padding. Occasionally, old cloth was used for the inner layer, but, for a marriage *sujni*, new cloth was always used. The “carpet” kantha embroidered in cross stitch, like the *sujni* used new red *salu* for the upper layer, but, instead of cotton padding, it used

cloth for the inner layer as well. The *sujni* was worked in a fine back stitch, generally in white, in arabesques and floral designs. The “carpet” kantha used coloured threads to embroider geometric or floral motifs in cross stitch.

Utilitarian kanthas made of *lungis* are coloured. Kanthas made from *lungis* are, however, generally simple kanthas, put together with a minimum of stitching. What we now call *nakshi* kanthas were not, in the past, made from coloured materials.

With the kantha revival, however, there are changes in the material used. Most new kanthas today that are made to order are made of new cloth. Where attempts are made to keep close to the tradition, *markin*,<sup>3</sup> unbleached white cotton, is used. At Nari Kalyan Sangstha at Magura, *markin* is used to make kanthas which serve as blankets while long cloth or coloured poplin is used to make bedspreads. As this cloth is somewhat thicker than old sari material, only two layers of cloth are used. Occasionally, however, silk is being used. In fact, the “kanthas” made by Skill Development for Underprivileged Women use exclusively silk for the upper layer. Silk continues to be used by Arshi-Salesian Sisters and at St. Paul’s Sewing Centre. However, other organizations like Aarong and Kumudini too are using silk, especially for saris and *kurtas*, embroidered with kantha motifs. Wall hangings and cushions too are often made of silk.

Many handicraft outlets are commissioning kanthas made with bright surface material to cater to changing tastes. Folk Bangla—formerly Ideas—offers kantha bedspreads in muted shades, perhaps more welcome to western tastes. Usually designed and planned with an eye on a foreign or sophisticated clientele, the total colour scheme is planned—thus avoiding the often garish effect of the red “carpet” kanthas which used brilliant greens and blues on red *salu*.

Traditionally, threads were drawn from sari borders to stitch the motifs. However, at Rajshahi, where embroidery was heavy and a lot of coloured thread was necessary, new yarn was used. It is interesting to note that the embroidery

<sup>3</sup> Bangla for “American.”

at Rajshahi was so heavy that both cloth and yarn were weighed before being given to the needlewoman. When the finished kantha was returned, it was weighed again to see that no yarn had been stolen. This process continues to be used at handicraft outlets where cloth and yarn are supplied to kantha-makers. While older kanthas were embroidered in cotton yarn, most handicraft organizations today prefer to use shiny rayon thread.

The type of yarn used for embroidery has also influenced the colours of the kantha. In traditional kanthas, which used old threads drawn from sari borders, colours were limited to red, black, blue and white. Newer kanthas, on the other hand, employ a wide range of colours. The colours of a traditional kantha, apart from being limited, also tended to be muted. With the saris having been through several washes, the coloured borders from which threads were drawn for kantha work acquired soft, muted tones.

Most writers on the kantha comment on the predominance of black and/or blue and red. Kramrisch, for instance, notes that these must have been the original colours. She suggests that kanthas containing considerable amounts of green and yellow are composed of a variety of stitches pointing to a later date.<sup>4</sup> Black and/or blue and red are the colours of the Rajshahi *lohorī* kanthas as well, though the *pan* kantha—the Rajshahi *lohorī* embellished with the betel leaf motif—uses green instead of blue or black and red.

It is possible that the earlier kanthas used these few colours because others were fugitive. But even today an older woman stitching a kantha tends to prefer the traditional colours, saying "*Anya rangulo phute na*," other colours do not show up so well. However, apart from availability of colour and the effect of the different colours, colours possessed symbolic meaning. In *alpana* designs, as well, there is the predominant use of three colours: red, black and white. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, for example, in *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, speaks of the use of brick dust, coal, and rice powder for red, black and white respectively.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Kantha," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. 7, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (London, 1951).

White, red and black are the respective colours of the three virtues or *gunas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, that is, purity, passion and darkness as Radhakrishnan notes. But white, red and black are also the colours of water, fire and earth. "By the union of Sat or being with the three elements of fire, water and earth, all the varied manifestations of the world are produced. The red colour of fire is the colour of *tejas*, the white of *apas* and the black of *anna* ... *apas* is water, *anna* is earth."<sup>6</sup>

Did the Bengali needlewoman of the past consider all this when she was threading her needle? Perhaps no, but the old archetypes must have been present in some dim recesses of her ancestral memory. And, as she embroidered a kantha, mingled with her own hopes and fears, she embroidered a prayer for unity and harmony of the world around her.

Two exquisite kanthas in the Zainul Abedin Collection—perhaps from the same household—use bright pink wool for some of the motifs. The type of yarn used in the past depended on availability. Obviously, the kantha-maker/s of these two kanthas had access to wool—suggesting exposure to the west and a greater affluence than the general kantha-maker.

The new kanthas that have emerged after 1978-79 have attempted to revive some of the older forms and colours. The red cross-stitch kantha, while not quite disappearing, has given way to the traditional kantha with more muted tones. Differences, however, may be seen in the kanthas designed by the various organizations. Thus the Aarong kanthas, while generally using red and blue and black threads on a white background, are not averse to using pinks, maroons, yellows and greens. At the same time, they use coloured material as well, such as red or black for cushion covers. The Aarong kanthas generally tend to be bright. On the other hand, while Kumudini also uses bright coloured threads for small articles such as spectacle cases and purses, Kumudini kanthas generally use muted colours, particularly shades of green and blue and brown.

<sup>6</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Principal Upanishads* (London, 1953), 452.

The attempt at muted colours is deliberate. It is an attempt to replicate the effect of the older traditional kanthas which, however, it should be remembered, used muted polychromes rather than the muted monochromes used by Kumudini. At Folk Bangla light beige, pink, and blue seem to be the colours of choice.

Thread drawn from old sari borders is no longer used for kanthas. Instead, rayon yarn is used. The first experiments with kanthas used coloured cotton yarn, the same yarn that was used in weaving. Market demand for a slightly "shiny" kantha has perhaps caused this change. One of the ways of distinguishing older kanthas from newer ones is by the yarn used. Chemical dyes are used for dyeing the yarn in bright colours; Kumudini uses vegetable dyes for its muted shades.

The kantha revival in West Bengal, particularly within the last three years, has attempted to replicate traditional motifs and stitches. Yarn used for embroidery is, however, embroidery yarn.

## Making a Kantha

Traditionally at least 4-5 saris were needed to make a full-length kantha. Today, old saris are being replaced by new cotton material. As this material is thicker than the material of fine old saris, two layers of cloth are sufficient, one for the top, one for the bottom. To make full-size kanthas, generally 5 feet by 6 feet, lengths of cloth are joined to give the required width. In the Rajshahi *lohorī* kanthas, there is often a narrow red or blue border running down the length of the kantha, testifying to the *kapas* that have been joined to make the kantha.

After the cloth has been joined to give the necessary width, the layers of cloth are spread on the ground, one on top of the other. This process is the work of at least two women. The cloth must be smoothed out so that there are no folds or creases either on the surface layers or the lower ones. Weights are placed on the edges to keep the cloth down while the kantha is at this stage. Mohammad Sayeedur noted that thorns from date trees are used to pin the four corners down.<sup>1</sup> In traditional kanthas—which were not meant to be framed as wall-pieces—the edges would then be carefully folded in and stitched. During all this time, the kantha must be kept flat on the ground to prevent the layers of cloth being displaced or wrinkled. After the four edges have been stitched, rows of large stitches are taken down the length of the kantha to keep the kantha together. It is also probable that these lengths of stitches acted as guide lines for motifs and decorative borders—

<sup>1</sup> "Nakshi Kantha Art: A Folk Art of Bangladesh," *The Bangla Academy Journal*, January-June 1992: 3.



Latifa Begum: Taking the last few stitches in a kantha



Kantha-maker at Rashimpur

Perfecting kantha skills



Kantha-makers at Kumudini



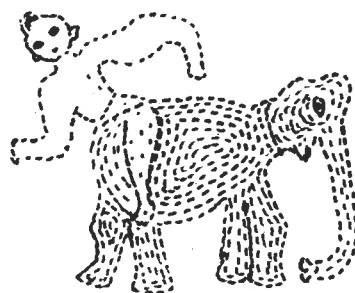
Checking for flaws at Kumudini. The girl with braids is Totini, who later started Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa

especially in kanthas where the whole field of the kantha is divided into panels. Once the kantha has been put together in this fashion, it can be folded and kept away to be stitched at leisure, alone or together with other women folk.

While it is a matter of conjecture how women traditionally embroidered kanthas, one may assume that when designs were not drawn on to the cloth, the needlewoman would tend to embroider certain focal points first and then the filling motifs. When the predominant feature of the kantha was the central motif, this would be done first. Corner motifs would follow and then other motifs around these focal points. This is why in most kanthas, despite the seeming haphazard nature of the motifs, there is a sense of order and harmony. The stitches used to fill motifs in older kanthas were variations of the running stitch. Thus the *kaitya*, the *chatai*, the kantha stitch, or the darning stitch picked out the motif from the rippled white background. The darning stitch could also take a variety of shapes. Thus the stitches could be minuscule, creating a pointillistic effect of dots; they could be interwoven to flatly cover the entire motif; or they could form a thick pattern of close ribs. The motifs in many newer kanthas—specially those worked commercially—tend to lack the variety of stitches displayed in the older kanthas.

In older kanthas the kantha *phor* used for background stitching tended to be worked around the motifs before moving out and merging. The effect of this manner of working tended to almost mould the motifs so that they stood out from the rippled background. In newer kanthas, however, the background stitching tends to move lengthways and breadthways without regard to the motifs. The use of the embroidery hoop also causes the material to be held tight, thus avoiding the characteristic ripples of old pieces.

Where the kantha-maker is not careful to pierce through the layers of material, the rippled effect is lost. The motifs themselves in many newer kanthas—specially those worked commercially—tend to lack the variety of stitches displayed in the older kanthas.



Transparent figure

While generally most kanthas have used the kantha *phor* or kantha stitch for background stitching—thus creating the characteristic ripples of the kantha—in the “kanthas” that used to be made at the Skill Development for Underprivileged Women and are now being made at Arshi-Salesian Sisters and St. Paul’s Sewing Centre<sup>2</sup> the background stitching has been the darning stitch proper. The reason for this change was to create a smooth surface, rather than a rippled one. (Writers who, following Kramrisch, still speak of the kantha stitch as being the darning stitch should examine the effect of the two different types of stitching. The darning stitch creates a smooth surface, whereas the kantha stitch, if worked closely enough, will always produce ripples.) At Banchte Shikha Hasta Shilpa, kantha-makers refer to the kantha stitch as *kuchki* because of this puckering effect.

Originally, kantha-makers did not draw motifs or scenes onto the quilt. Whatever they wished to embroider was first outlined with needle and thread. Occasionally, not satisfied just with an outline, the kantha-maker started to fill in a design. Some very primitive effects are created by this manner of working. For example, the scene of a rider on a horse or an elephant often depicts a transparent rider. One understands that the needlewoman first outlined the horse or the elephant and then the rider before filling in the motifs. Modern kanthas occasionally replicate this effect deliberately.

Many *bostanis* or *baytons*—wrappers for clothes or other precious articles—are, apart from a central motif, composed entirely of border patterns based on sari borders. One imagines that the outer edge would serve as a guide for the borders which run parallel to the outer border. When the needlewoman continued to work these borders and then came to the central motif, the kantha tended to get bunched up in the middle. Some otherwise very fine kanthas may be seen with this characteristic puckering. However, when the



Transparent figure

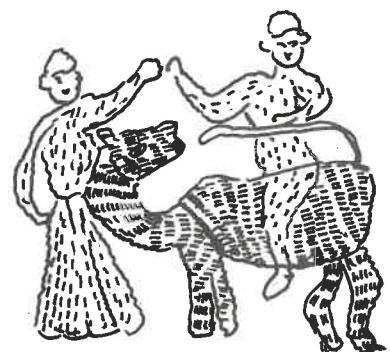
<sup>2</sup> When Father Rigon thought of setting up the sewing centre, he sent some of the women to get trained at Arshi. After returning, they taught others, thus replicating Arshi work.

needlewoman seems to have embroidered the central motif before proceeding all the way to the edge, the kantha surface is smooth.

In the Rajshahi *lohoris* quilts, the outer edge served as a guideline for the design, with the kantha-maker using her needle and thread to work the outline of the wave or diamond motifs that predominate in this type of kantha. There was also a very simple *lohoris* where the stitches fell into parallel ridges so that the entire surface of the kantha is marked out in alternating lines of red, white and black/blue ridges. In the *lohoris*, work would necessarily proceed from one end of the kantha. In the “carpet,” *sujni*, and *lik* kanthas, however, needle and thread alone are not sufficient. In the “carpet” and *lik* kanthas, a wooden block with parallel lines would be used to mark out the material with squares. Cross stitch in the case of “carpet” kanthas and *lik* designs in the case of *lik* kanthas would then be worked. In the *sujni* as well, wooden blocks were used to print the central design, overall motifs and border patterns before the embroidery could begin. These wooden blocks are being replaced today by patterns drawn on tracing paper. The designs are pricked out and the designs “printed” on the cloth with laundry blue that has been liquefied with kerosene oil.

*Batuas* and *gilafs*, cases for the Quran, and small purses were made from square kanthas. After the kanthas were stitched, three corners were brought together in envelope fashion and the edges joined.<sup>3</sup> To the corner left unstitched a long tassel was attached which served to bind the *batua* or *gilaf*.

Traditional kanthas tend to be somewhat uneven in shape. The needlewoman did not use a frame to stretch the kantha. Hence, the manner of working, as well as the puckering effect of the kantha *phor* tended to “shrink” the kantha. Occasionally, the centres of square kanthas suffered the most, bunching up in the middle. To counteract this unevenness and bunching effect, most organizations today are using embroidery frames to stretch the kantha while it is being worked. Particularly at SDUW and now at Arshi



Transparent figure

<sup>3</sup> In Sindh, Pakistan, Quran covers are made in the same way using *rilli* work.



Lohori kantha from Rajshahi

and St. Paul's where a smooth effect is desired, all work is done in frames. After the "kantha" is completed, a further smoothening and evenness is achieved by washing and stretching the "kantha" while still damp on a wooden frame.

Most writers on the kantha speak of old thread used for kantha work, but it should be noted that where there was considerable use of thread, sari borders did not always prove sufficient. Hence new yarn was also used. In Jessore and Rajshahi, for instance, yarn—called *pheti* in Jessore and *pheri* in Rajshahi—was used. A number of strands were used at a time. In Jessore the strands were left as they were, but in Rajshahi the strands—usually about five in number—were twisted into one thick thread by means of a *taika* or spindle. The *taika* has a groove through which the strands pass. The *taika* is then twisted, and the thicker thread collected at its rounded end. The thick thread and the close stitching in the *lohorı* kanthas produce the characteristic ridge-like texture. In the thinner Jessore-type kanthas, the fine stitches produce a ripple effect in the texture of the cloth. The stitches, however, are small, and one is not aware of the thread at first glance.

Kantha with floral motifs



## Influence of Religion and Folk Belief on the Kantha

Religion and folk belief have been some of the strongest influences on the kantha. Folk belief and superstitions, for instance, have influenced choice of material. The kantha is made of rags—the Sanskrit word *kantha* (pr. *kontha*) literally means rags. Anyone who has visited Indian shrines knows the magical function of rags. In the fretted doorways of the shrines of *pirs* or popular saints, or tied to the branches of trees, may be seen hundreds of rags, symbols of hundreds of prayers. Rags have been used for another purpose as well, that of warding off the evil eye. To the primitive mind, in agrarian societies, the gods of nature are thought of as jealous, ready to snatch away a precious life. To keep a loved one safe, one has to practise deception. By wrapping a loved one in rags one shows the gods that one does not care. "The patchwork quilt, a collection of tatters, guarantees immunity from black magic, protection and security, as do even the rags themselves when offered to the gods," says Stella Kramrisch.<sup>1</sup>

But the kantha has another meaning as well. It is made not just from rags but from the rags of a woman's old sari. An old sari is soft, as soft as the kantha will be when it is made, as soft as the arms in which one would like to hold the loved one safe. Far away from home, the kantha becomes the symbol of one's wife or mother. When Rupa dies in Jasim Uddin's poem, it is with the quilt his wife has made wrapped around his body.



Rath

<sup>1</sup> Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), 67.

The influence of religion and folk belief has worked in other important ways: Firstly, to create different traditions of kantha art, Hindu and Muslim, iconographic and non-iconographic, and secondly, to create different types of kantha articles owing to the different life-styles of the two religions. At the same time it should also be noted that, despite the obvious differences between kanthas of the two different religions, there was one great similarity which resulted from the fact that Hindus and Muslims in Bengal came not only from the same roots, but dwelt in the same land, subject to the same vicissitudes of fortune, the same vagaries of nature.

After the kantha revival of the early eighties, the religious differences are being eliminated. Thus women from Muslim backgrounds are also engaged in embroidering kanthas with motifs which have distinct associations with Hindu mythology and folk ways. Similarly, Hindu women are engaged in embroidering kanthas with Islamic motifs. However, an examination of the kanthas traditionally belonging to the different areas of Bangladesh will reveal how kanthas have developed differently among different religious groups.

Kanthas from areas where the predominant culture was Muslim, like at Rajshahi, have developed differently from those where the predominant culture was Hindu as, for example, at Jessore. Thus Rajshahi kanthas have geometrical motifs; Rajshahi *sujnis* have floral motifs, scroll work, the arabesques and flourishes typical of of Islamic art. In Faridpur and Jessore, along with floral and vegetal motifs, there are animal and human motifs as well. In addition to human representations, kanthas embroidered by Hindu women often represent Hindu deities, for example, Lakshmi, Durga, Radha, and Krishna. Many of these deities are associated with animals and birds. Thus Lakshmi may be accompanied by an elephant, and Durga mounted on a lion. In one the finest extant specimens of kantha work, Lakshmi is seated in a circle of dancing figures with an elephant on either side. The *rath*, the chariot of Vishnu or Jagannath, is also a popular motif in Hindu kanthas.



Tree-of-life

While organized religion is orthodox, there is often a crossing over of religious boundaries as anyone who has visited Siva temples or Muslim shrines knows. Thus, Hindus and Sikhs visit the shrine of Hazrat Khwaja Muinuddin Chisty at Ajmer—as Hindus and Buddhists visit the dargah of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet—and childless Muslim women climb up the steep steps to the Chandranath temple at Sitakundu, 37 kilometres from Chittagong. It is not surprising therefore to find Hindu and Muslim motifs juxtaposed in some kanthas. Thus, a number of kanthas at the Bangladesh National Museum have depictions of both a stylized *rath* and a mosque.

Some Hindu motifs, however, seem to have become so associated with kanthas that they lost all association with Hinduism and were embroidered by Hindu and Muslim alike. The lotus, for example, the solar motif, even the "S" symbol of Lakshmi's footprint, seem to have lost their religious overtones and were embroidered by Muslim women as well. The *shostri chinho*, the swastika, is another case in point. With many more arms than the original swastika, more curvilinear as well, the *shostri chinho* becomes an "auspicious" symbol. Its religious origins are also obscured by the different names it is known by: *golok dhanda* (the maze) or *muchri* (the twisted).

Nor did Muslim women entirely shun representations of the human form. Thus, in a kantha purchased by the Bangladesh National Museum from Sakhawat Moral, there are human figures and fairy heads in addition to birds and animals. The strictures against iconographic art—plus the lack of exposure to representational art—must have induced Muslim women to favour *par* or border designs and floral motifs. As Gurusaday Dutt pointed out, some of the finest *par* designs embroidered all over kanthas are to be found embroidered by Muslim women. It is only now, after the kantha revival, that irrespective of religion, kantha-makers are embroidering whatever designs they are being given. As Musammat Rabeya, a kantha-maker from Pathalia, Jamalpur, said to me, "Kantha banatam. Hati, ghora banatam na." We would make kanthas, but we would not embroider elephants and horses. She pointed out that the



Gopis pleading with Krishna to return their clothes



Fairy figure. Note the ridged effect of the embroidery of the motifs

women of Jamalpur had started to embroider animal and human figures after BRAC had taught them to do so.

The Muslim kantha-maker perhaps did not always consciously avoid human representation. The Hindu woman is surrounded by depictions of the human form—which the Muslim woman is not. In her daily rituals, in her visits to the temples, the Hindu woman is overwhelmed by these depictions. The crude forms of the Hindu deities made by the village artisans juxtapose the exquisite stone and metal statues of the temples. The terracotta depictions at Kantajee Temple or at Puthia depict scenes, many of which seem replicated in old kanthas. The Hindu devotee cannot avoid being influenced by these forms. Kanthas embroidered by Hindu women who have been exposed to temple art thus reflect this influence. Apart from representations of deities, the Hindu kantha-maker also used her knowledge of the human form to depict men and women. There were no strictures against nudity, and an

adept kantha-maker from Faridpur has embroidered nude *gopis* pleading with Krishna on the tree top to return their clothes. In another kantha from Jessore, bare-breasted maidens encircle a bare-breasted goddess Lakshmi.

Apart from creating two different traditions of kantha art, the Muslim influence in Bengal also created different kantha articles: the *jainamaz*, the *dastarkhan*, and the *gilaf*. In form and motif the kantha *jainamaz* replicates the traditional woven Muslim prayer rug, with a *mihrab*—mosque-arch—and even a pictorial representation of a mosque. Similarly, the need to cover the holy book gave rise to the *gilaf*—the envelope-like kantha. The Muslim tradition of communal eating also produced the *dastarkhan*—the long spread for an eating place.

However, despite these differences, it should be noted that perhaps more important than these obvious differences are the similarities of the impulses that created the kantha.

The most important of the religious influences was not that of Hinduism or of Islam, but of folk belief and magic. In a land dependent on the vagaries of nature, propitiation of natural forces becomes an important part of the lives of the people. It was this very important fact that syncretized, if not religion, at least, folk belief. In rural Bengal, particularly, we note this syncretism. Thus, while the Muslim marriage ceremony is based on the *Sharia* and is basically a social contract where the man takes a woman as his wife on payment of a certain sum of money known as the *meher* or dower,<sup>2</sup> the ceremonies preceding the actual marriage ceremony are similar for Muslims and Hindus alike. Thus the *lagan* or *holud* ceremony, with the bride being smeared with turmeric and medicinal herbs and spices, followed by a ritual bath, as well as the ritual articles that are laid out on the occasion—the fish, the *dubba* grass, the banana sapling—are similar for Hindus as well as Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Often confused with dowry, dower is the money paid by the groom to his wife; dowry, on the other hand, is what the bride brings from her natal home for the groom.

<sup>3</sup> The *lagan* or *gaye holud* ceremony was separate for men and women. Today, some families combine the two with the bride and groom sitting side by side. Some Bengali Muslim families, however, do not observe the ceremony, claiming that it is not Islamic.

In an agrarian community, all religious differences were wiped out in the one great religion of nature and harmony with nature. That is why even when we talk of religious differences and the effect these had on the kantha, we must remember that existing side by side with these differences was also a great similarity. Men and women have been very close to nature in Bengal. Their lives are governed by natural forces and their social life too is guided by the seasons. This close association between nature and human beings is reflected in what we may call, for want of another term, folk magic.

Folk magic has, from earliest times, been related to folk art. The earliest examples of art—cave drawings—are believed to have been made not to beautify the walls of caves, but to ensure that the hunt was successful. Writers of early art are unanimous in noting the relation between art and magic. As E. O. Christensen points out, art has, from the earliest times, given human beings a feeling of protection against the forces of nature. "Art was not the first step in his struggle against insecurity. Man's feelings, his fears came first, they prompted his beliefs, and his beliefs found expression in Art."<sup>4</sup>

This close association between nature, folk magic and art is to be observed in two of the art forms practised by Bengali women: the kantha and the *alpana*, ritual drawings on the ground made with a paste of rice flour—though other ingredients were also used, such as charcoal and brick powder. *Alpanas* are closely associated with *bratas*, religious ceremonies performed in observance of certain vows. There is something distinctly magical about these *bratas*, and the *alpanas* drawn on these occasions served magico-religious purposes.

Fahmida Majid suggests that the *alpana* had its origin in the magical circle that Rama drew around Sita when he had to leave her. Sita was safe inside this circle. Ravana, who had come to abduct Sita, knew that unless she ventured out of this circle he had no power over her. Disguised as a yogi,

<sup>4</sup> *Primitive Art* (New York, 1955), 53.

Ravana persuaded Sita to step outside the circle. Once she did so, she was in his power.<sup>5</sup>

Mohammad Sayeedur points out in "Loukik Chitrakalar Alpana" that *alpanas* are closely related to nature worship: they appease the cruel gods and pray for plenty. Tapan Mohan Chatterjee also points out the association of *alpanas* to nature. Whether we call the *bratas* magico-religious ceremonies or semi-religious ceremonies, they are mainly concerned with appeasement of the forces of nature and a celebration of its bounties. Thus *bratas* were celebrated to observe the change of the seasons, to celebrate the harvest, to pray for rain. They were also observed to pray for the well-being of husband, father, son. A brief list of the different *bratas* will give an idea of the different occasions when *alpanas* are used—and therefore explain how these *alpanas* became associated with different prayers and vows. The seasonal *bratas* include the *Bhaduli Brata*, celebrating the goddess of the rains, the *Maghmandal Brata* celebrating the cult of the sun god, the *Lakshmi Brata*, performed in Autumn, celebrating the harvesting of the new rice. The *Toshla Brata* invoked prayers so that fields might become plentiful. In addition to these seasonal *bratas* there are other *bratas* that are prayers for the well-being of loved ones. The *Bhaduli Brata*, for example, which celebrated the rains, also prayed for the well-being of father, husband, son. Marriages inspire other *bratas*.

The *alpanas* drawn for these *bratas*, as well as for birth and marriage ceremonies, often have magical import.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore interesting to note the traditional motifs that would be drawn in *alpanas*. These include lotuses, creepers, animals, anthropomorphic figures, trees, heavenly bodies, footprints, and material objects desired by devotees. *Alpanas* for the well-being of male members of the family include motifs of rivers, tigers and boats, suggesting that, by enclosing these within the magic circle, the devotee was ensuring the safety of her loved men. Many of these motifs

<sup>5</sup> "Alpana," Notes written for the Commonwealth Institute (London: 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Tapan Mohan Chatterjee, *Alpona* (Calcutta, 1965), p. 1.

may be seen as common to both kanthas and *alpanas*. In addition, the traditional configuration of the kantha also resembles that of *alpanas*. In *Naksha*, Sayyada R. Ghuznavi has an illustration of a *Sejuti Brata Alpana* depicting a central lotus inscribed within a *mandala* or circle. Boats, ornaments, the sun and moon, a palanquin, all figure prominently in this *alpana*.<sup>7</sup> It is not therefore wrong to assume that the same motives that inspired the *bratas* and the *alpanas* also inspired the kanthas. Kramrisch, for example, points out that thematically the art of the kantha is an enriched textile version of the *alpana*, with its magic purpose being enhanced by the textile symbolism of its material.<sup>8</sup> In both the *alpana* and the kantha, the women of Bengal propitiated the gods and goddesses of nature, and prayed to them for the things close to their hearts: the safety of hearth and home, the well-being of their husbands and sons, harvests of plenty, fertility.

The kantha was stitched for a new-born child, for one's husband, for a grown-up son, for one's daughter to take when she got married and left her home for the home of her in-laws. It was also made, as Manadasundari's kantha in the Gurusaday Collection reveals, for an honoured father. Colour, motifs, over-all designs were not only ornamental but also symbolic. The mother or grandmother embroidering a kantha for a girl to take with her to her new home would embroider lotuses, fishes, leaves, a winnowing fan, symbols of plenty and fertility. But she would also draw with needle and thread combs and mirrors, a vermillion pot, a *kajal-lata*, or container for lamp-black with which women line their eye-lids. These would be symbols of a married woman. At the same time she would add horses and elephants, symbols of material wealth. Like the primitive artist hunter, she would be "capturing" these objects for the loved one for whom she was making the kantha. And much later, when this child was a mother or grandmother, she too would portray the very same objects for another girl-child.

<sup>7</sup> *Naksha: A Collection of Designs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1981), 572.

<sup>8</sup> *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia, 1968).



Purnoshashi Saha beginning a lotus



Purnoshashi Saha drawing a petal



Purnoshashi Saha's filled-out lotus

It may also be conjectured that the importance of the lotus which appears as the focal point in many kanthas has a lot to do with its centrality in the *alpana*. In 2006, I accompanied Mohammed Sayeedur to Kishoreganj where he took us to see ritual *alpanas* being drawn by Purnoshashi Saha, a Hindu woman of about eighty. When she sat down to draw the *alpana*, her steady hands first drew a straight line, then another across it a right angle. A third and then a fourth line gave the structure of the lotus. It became very clear at that moment why the most common lotus form in many kanthas was the *astadal padma* or eight-petalled lotus. Moreover, it was from that centre that the motif expanded outwards. The lotus symbolizes the seat of the gods but also the woman, being as it were both symbol and signature.

The *brata alpanas* have given way to decorative *alpanas*; Hindu and Muslim girls alike decorate *alpanas* without any thought of the earlier inspiration behind these *alpanas*. Similarly, Hindu and Muslim women embroider kanthas without a thought that these traditional motifs were not meaningless decorations. Nevertheless, what remains, despite all the changes, is that *alpana* and kantha are women's art, and art, that, with changing circumstances, is being increasingly usurped by men. But it is perhaps not surprising that the finest of kanthas today are still the work of women.

## Kantha Stitches

The earliest and most basic of the numerous embroidery stitches to be found in kanthas is the running stitch. The predominant form of this stitch in the kantha should be called the kantha *phor* or kantha stitch, not the darning stitch. Stella Kramrisch was, perhaps, responsible for designating the form that the running stitch takes in kanthas as the darning stitch: "The technique is that of darning."<sup>1</sup> Following Kramrisch, many writers have referred to the kantha stitch as the "darning" stitch. Thus, Rustam J. Mehta speaks of the different stitches used in the kantha, "the commonest and most typical being very small darning stitches."<sup>2</sup> The darning stitch, however, it should be noted, is an "interwoven stitch." Mehta himself describes how this stitch is worked:

The needle is run along the cloth, taking up small areas of the cloth at intervals. Correctly, the space between each row should be the same as the length of the stitch, the stitches in each row alternating with the preceding and following row.<sup>3</sup>

Now, anyone who has closely observed the stitchcraft of the kantha will notice that there is no interweaving, nor do the stitches in each row alternate with those of the preceding row. If this had been the case, there would not have been the ripples so characteristic of the kantha. This is, of course, not to deny that the true darning stitch may be found in the kantha, but this is in minute proportions to the kantha stitch. The darning stitch is used not for the body or field of the kantha, but for borders and motifs. Kramrisch

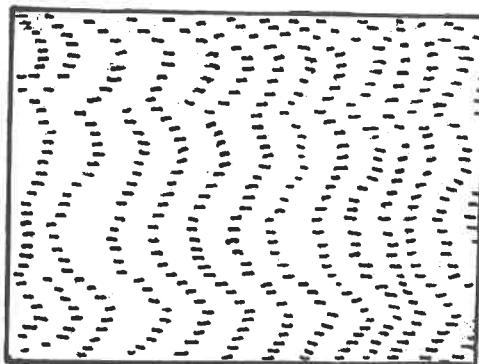
<sup>1</sup> "Kantha," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. 7 (1939), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India* (Bombay, 1960), 115.

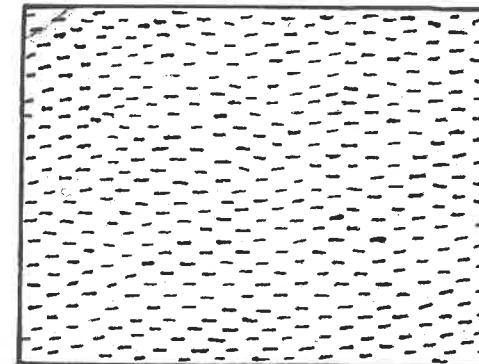
<sup>3</sup> *Handicrafts*, 117.

seemed to have realized her mistake. Thus, in *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* she notes, "The stitches are of the simplest kind, the running stitch being not only the main but also the most ingeniously employed."<sup>4</sup> What is most significant is, as Kramrisch points out, the intricate uses to which the running stitch was put in the kantha, testifying to the ingenuity of kantha embroiderers.

The kantha *phor* is basically a running stitch, but worked in a manner that creates the ripples characteristic of old kanthas. In working this stitch, small running stitches are taken to cover areas of the cloth meant to be quilted. The quilter must take care to see that the needle passes through the several folds of cloth. The spaces between the stitches are larger than the stitches themselves. When the second row is taken, it is parallel to the previous row, but the stitches fall slightly behind or move slightly forward instead of alternating with the stitches in the preceding or succeeding rows. It is this manner of working that produces the rippled effect, the wavy ridges between the stitches. At Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa, the embroiderers referred to the stitch as *kuchki*, because of the rippled effect it produces.



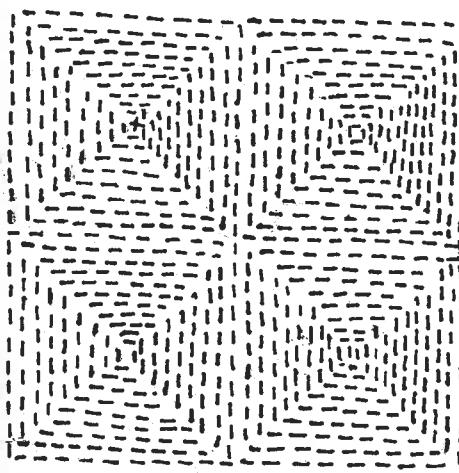
The kantha stitch



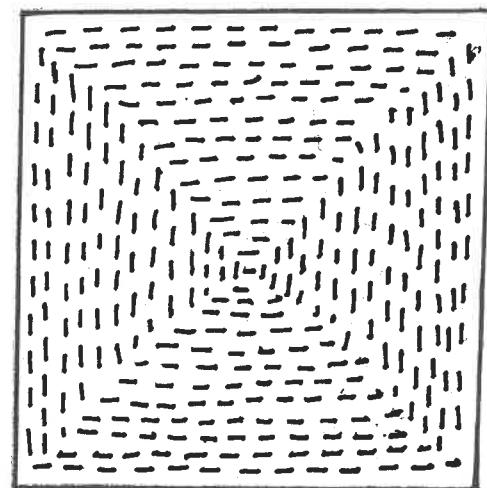
The darning stitch

When kantha stitches are taken around motifs there is still a tendency to parallel rows, but each row curves with the motif at its centre. This manner of working around a motif often creates an almost sculptured effect, as Kramrisch notes, with "an effect of modelling of its own kind on the textured surface."<sup>5</sup> The very surface of the material undergoes a change. As Perveen Ahmed, who worked for several years with Karika points out, "The patterns flow and swirl, the entire work assuming an organic live quality."<sup>6</sup>

Occasionally, however, the field of the kantha is worked more regularly, even when using white yarn on a white field. Instead of proceeding in only one direction, the needlewoman works a small square at a time. The square is worked from the outside edge inwards. As the worker proceeds round and round the square, each row of stitches that is taken is parallel to the outer edge. When one square is finished another is worked next to it in the same manner. In this way there are both square motifs and diamond



Patterns that move and change



Working a square

<sup>5</sup> *Unknown India*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> "Kantha: The Embroidered Quilt," unpublished article.

<sup>4</sup> *Unknown India*, 67.

shapes. As Kramrisch points out in *Unknown India*, the patterns do not remain static, but move and change before our eyes, "the speckled textural effect of the stitches ... leads the eyes in more than one direction."<sup>7</sup>

For the last several years, Aranya, Kumudini, and Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa have been making very attractive silk shawls and stoles using the kantha stitch but in various geometrical configurations: circles, diamonds, triangles, squares etc. The rayon yarn used is often the same colour as the material. As a result, the stitches themselves do not strike the eye as much as the rippled texture of the article as well as the light and shade effect created by the undulations.

The kantha stitch is only one form that the running stitch takes in the kantha. Thus running stitches may be long or short, alternating with those in the preceding and succeeding rows, or bending slightly forward. Each manner of working results in a different appearance altogether. Several of these patterns have been given different names: the *chatai* or *pati* stitch, that is, the mat stitch, the *kaitya*, or bent stitch, and the *lik* or Holbein stitch. Along with these variations of the running stitch, almost every known embroidery stitch is also used in kanthas. One way of dating kanthas may be by examining the use of other embroidery stitches. Earlier kanthas largely used the running stitch; later ones resorted to a variety of stitches. As Kramrisch notes, "by the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the embroidery stitch is more frequently resorted to than earlier."<sup>8</sup>

**Chatai**<sup>9</sup> or pattern darning.<sup>10</sup> This stitch is also referred to as the *pati phor*,<sup>11</sup> both the names being derived from the resemblance of this stitch to woven grass matting. In this form of embroidery, the stitches are taken closely parallel to each other. The effect of such embroidery often resembles that of the satin stitch—perhaps one reason why many

<sup>7</sup> *Unknown India*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Unknown India*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> The term *chatai* was used by Begum Salima Ahmed of the Kushtia Mahila Samity.

<sup>10</sup> Alison Liley, *The Craft of Embroidery* (London, 1961), 53.

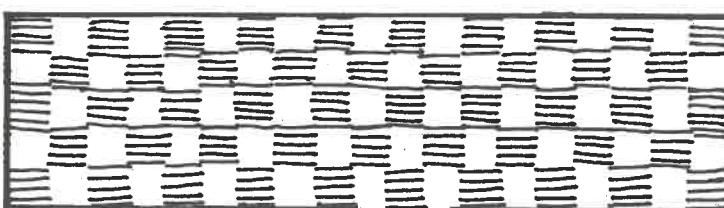
<sup>11</sup> Kantha-makers in Jamalpur used this term.

writers frequently refer to the use of the satin stitch in kanthas. It is only by turning over the kantha that one realizes which stitch has been used. The satin stitch "is worked from one side of the shape to the other, generally slanted at an angle. The needle takes an equally long stitch on the underside so that this is a stitch which eats up a large amount of thread."<sup>12</sup>

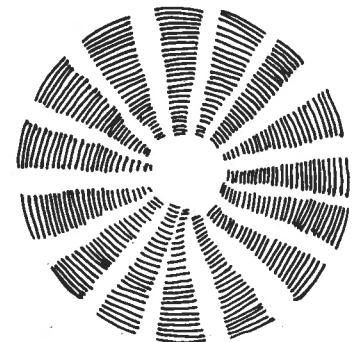
In the *chatai*, however, the worker makes closely parallel rows of running stitches, the rows and stitches both being parallel to each other. The areas covered with embroidery on the surface of the kantha are bare on the reverse and vice versa. Not only is there a minimum of thread wasted, but the work proceeds at a faster rate than in satin stitch embroidery where a minute portion of the embroidery is worked at a time.

A flower embroidered in satin stitch proceeds slowly as one petal is worked at a time, but a flower done in *chatai* grows quickly. In working with the indigenous stitch, the kantha-maker works spaced running stitches around the flower. Not only is the running stitch the most basic of stitches, but also one which allows the whole flower to almost spring into being at once. A glance at the reverse of a kantha easily reveals whether the satin stitch or the *chatai* has been used. A flower worked in satin stitch will appear the same on the reverse as well, whereas a flower worked in *chatai* will have a complementary design on the reverse.

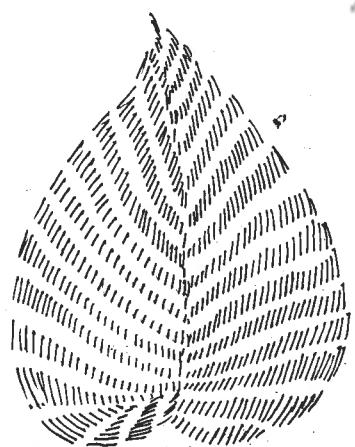
Some characteristic kantha motifs are embroidered using the *chatai*: leaves, flowers, the *chakra* or wheel, the *kalka* or paisley, and the betel leaf. The final effect belies the simplicity of the stitchcraft.



Chatai or pattern darning

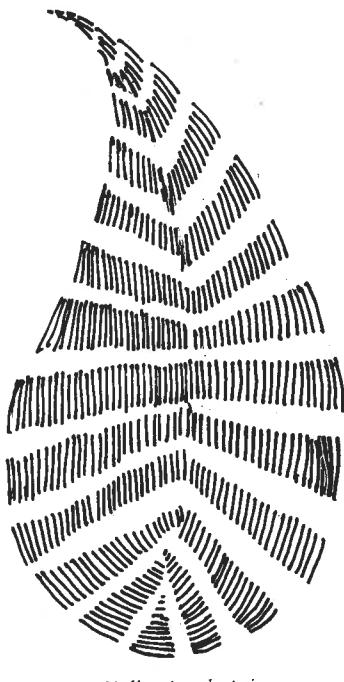


Chakra or wheel in chatai



Betel leaf in chatai

<sup>12</sup> Alison Liley, 53.



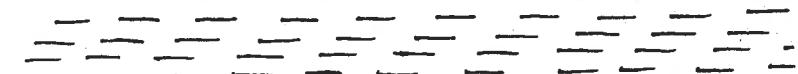
Kalka in chatai

There appears to be another version of this stitch which resembles *phulkari* work of the Punjab. In this form the space between the stitches is as small as possible, producing an almost matted effect. One difference between this manner of working and that of the *phulkari* is that the latter is limited to embroidery producing angular effects, whereas the former is used for a variety of shapes. Unlike *chatai* embroidery, *phulkari* work is done from the reverse.

The Rajshahi or *lohoi* stitch may be applied to the pattern darning or *chatai* prevalent in Rajshahi kanthas. Whereas in the normal *chatai* the space between the stitch might be almost equal to the stitch itself, in *lohoi* kanthas the stitches are always smaller than the spaces between the stitches. This manner of stitching, plus the thick yarn used in the embroidery, results in the parallel ridges characteristic of the Rajshahi kanthas.

In Rajshahi the final effect of the stitching resembles weaving more closely than it does needlework. The ridges created by the manner of stitching are rigid and regular. Coloured as well as white yarn is used so profusely all over the entire field that there is almost no separation of stitch from material, or motif from background in the Rajshahi kantha. At Rajshahi, the wave and the triangle are favourite motifs, but they are so worked as to merge with the entire field of the kantha; they do not remain separate as the motifs elsewhere do.

The *kaitya*,<sup>13</sup> or *bending* stitch. In this form of the running stitch, the stitches are taken in closely parallel rows. Each stitch, however, moves slightly forwards. The



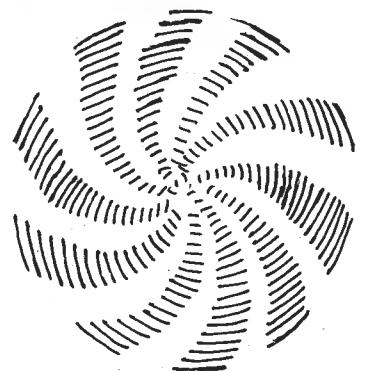
Kaitya: Pipre sari border

<sup>13</sup> This term was also used by Begum Salima Ahmed of the Kushtia Mahila Samity.

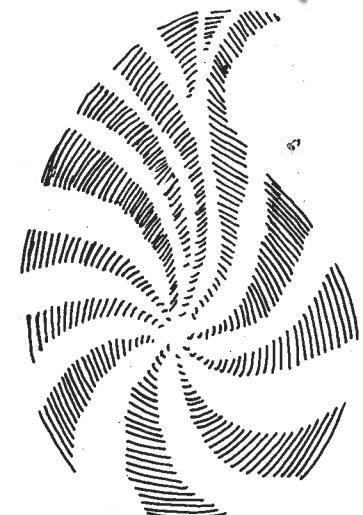
whole line seems to bend, the name of the stitch being derived from this effect. Borders such as *pipre sari* and *bichhe par* are worked very quickly using this stitch. In the same way, motifs can also be worked fairly quickly using this variation of the running stitch. The *shostir chinho*<sup>14</sup> or *swastika* is one instance where this stitch can be suitably employed. In working this motif, the needlewoman outlines the motif with stitches. Using these stitches as a guide line, she works the *kaitya* around the motif, producing a complete *shostir chinho* very quickly. Not only is very little time taken to create this lovely motif, but the effect created is similar to an optical illusion. The motif seems to move before our eyes, giving rise to the feeling that it represents a moving wheel.

Many motifs can be embroidered using either the *chatai* or the *kaitya*. The different form of the running stitch used will create different effects. *Chatai* work is thicker and bolder, whereas *kaitya* work produces a more delicate effect. Occasionally, the *kaitya* is also used for the background stitching. The *kaitya* is sometimes referred to as the *Kushtia phor* or stitch.

The weave running stitch. Some kantha borders are embroidered using the running stitch in a way more characteristic of weaving than embroidery. The stitch varies according to the length necessary, longer or shorter as the design demands. Fairly intricate borders are worked very quickly by this means, as the needle takes the part of the shuttle, weaving in and out of the cloth at required intervals. As Surovi Bhattacharjee notes, the embroidery of Bengal, "is a good example of the point where embroidery becomes indistinguishable from ornamental weaving and leaves one wondering which come first."<sup>15</sup> Nowhere is this truer than for what G. S. Dutt calls "textile pattern kanthas."<sup>16</sup>



Shostir chinho in kaitya



Kalka in kaitya

<sup>14</sup> This motif has several names, among them, *muchri* or *golok dhanda*.

<sup>15</sup> "The Weaver's Art of Bengal," *The Costumes and Textiles of India*, ed. J. B. Bhutan (Bombay, 1958), 54.

<sup>16</sup> "The Art of Kantha," *Modern Review* (Calcutta, 1939), 460.

As Dutt points out:

The technique of working these kanthas is that of weaving; forms and designs which appear on one face are complementary to those on the other and the right face is easily distinguishable from the reverse face in these kanthas.<sup>17</sup>

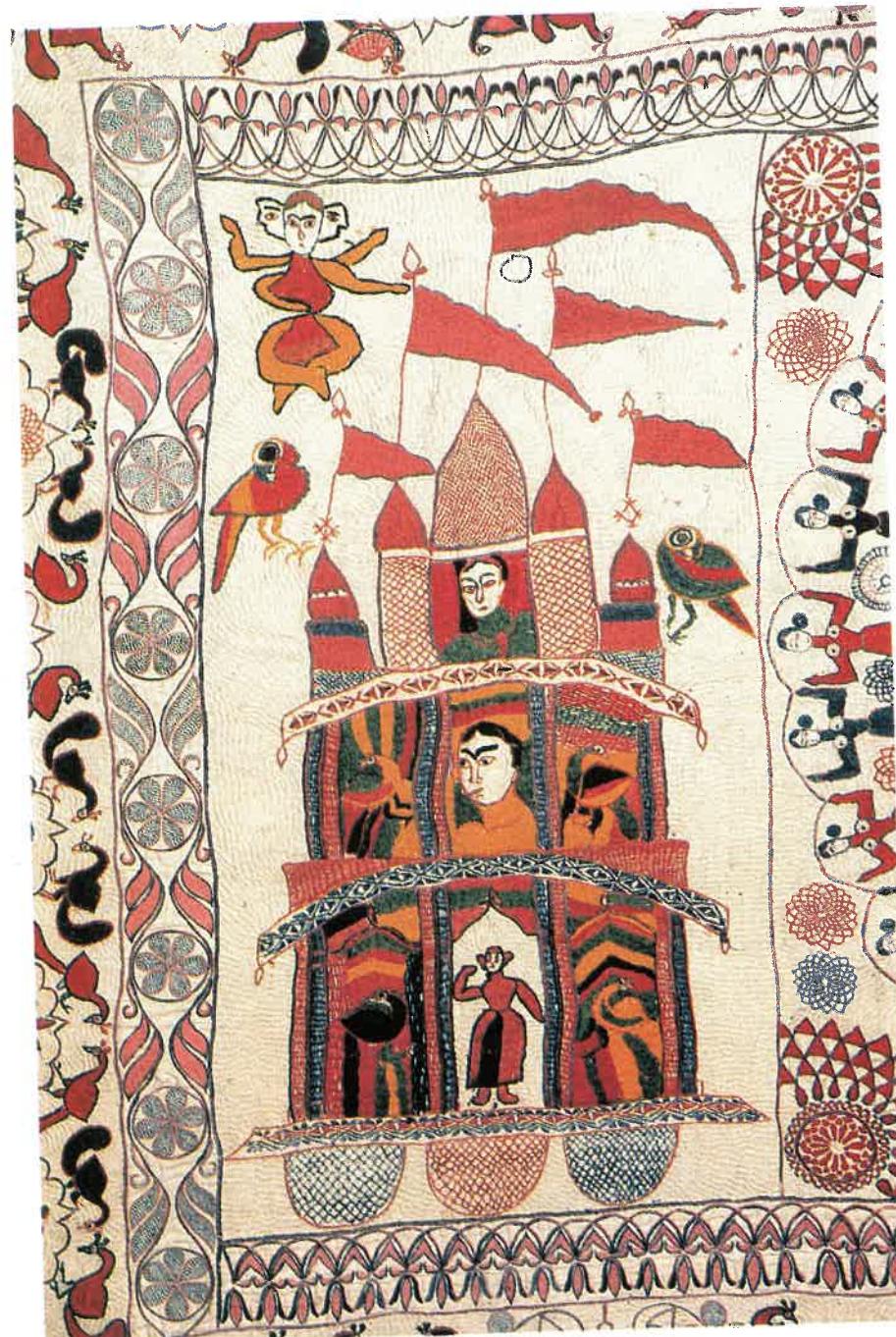
The **darning stitch** is also to be found in the kantha. Occasionally used for the field of the kantha—usually in more contemporary kanthas—it is more often used for embroidering motifs. Tiny stitches are taken with large spaces in between to fill the surface area of a motif. The effect of this stitch is a dotted, pointillistic one when worked with coloured thread on the white background of the kantha. Kramrisch points out that the stitchcraft of the kantha “yields effects akin to op art but having representational intentions.”<sup>18</sup> At Skill Development for Underprivileged Women, and later Arshi, the darning stitch replaced the kantha stitch for background stitching.

Other variations of the darning stitch are also worked in some kanthas. In one form, a row of large running stitches is worked, the spaces between the rows equalling the stitches themselves. In the next row the stitches and gaps between the stitches alternate with those of the previous row. Closely spaced rows are repeated to produce a large block of colour. The manner of stitching, however, produces an effect of flat ridges rather than the smooth surface that results when the gaps between the stitches are small, as in what is called the “Jessore stitch.”

The **Jessore stitch**, another variation of the darning stitch, is so called because of the embroidery done exclusively with this stitch on saris at Jessore today. But this stitch is also often found in old kanthas. In this form of working, the stitch is longer than the space between one stitch and the next. Rows of stitches are taken close to each other, so that the final effect is of a solid area of colour. The underside of the kantha has a dotted effect because of the minute stitches taken on the reverse of the cloth. This filling

<sup>17</sup> “The Art of Kantha,” 460.

<sup>18</sup> *Unknown India*, 68.



Detail of Jessore kantha showing a *rath*. Zainul Abedin Collection



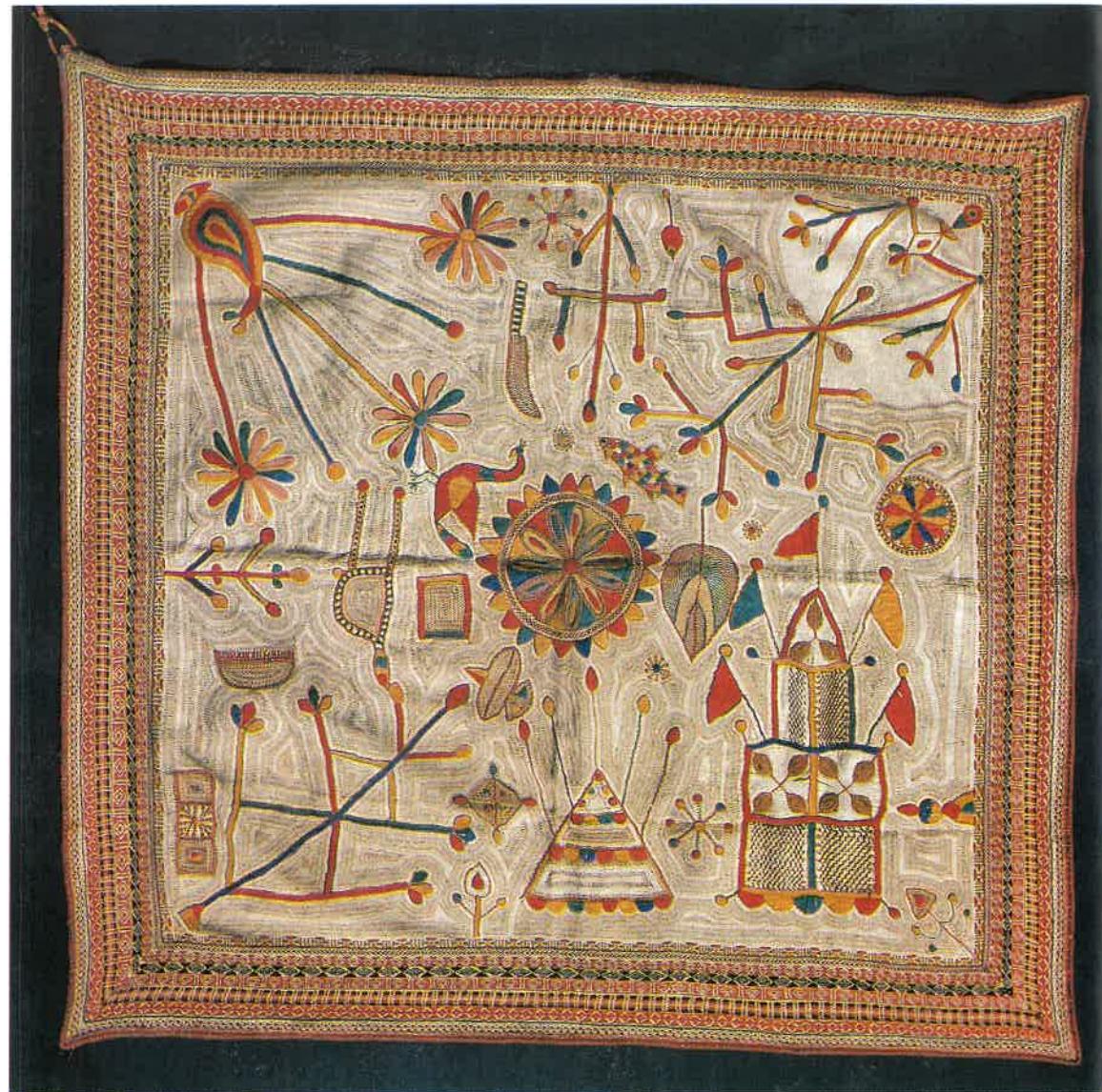
Detail of Jessore kantha with Gaja Lakshmi, the goddess being bathed by elephants.  
Zainul Abedin Collection

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Jainamaz from Bogra embroidered by Lutfunnessa Begum, circa 1950

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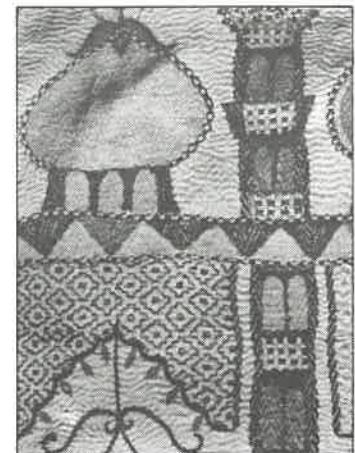
Bostani with a variety of motifs including a *rath*, trees-of-life, a peacock, a fish, and an *arshilata*.  
Bangladesh National Museum

stitch is today being replaced by the *bhorat* stitch which can be worked more rapidly.

The **threaded running stitch** is a popular one in the newer kanthas. In this form of stitching, a number of parallel rows of spaced running stitches are taken. The stitches are equal in length to the spaces between the stitches. Depending on the pattern wanted, the stitches either parallel or alternate with those of the previous row. When the required number of lines have been worked, the cloth is turned and the needle weaves in and out of these rows of stitches. Depending on the manner of threading the rows of stitches, different patterns emerge.

The *lik phor*,<sup>19</sup> as it is called in the Rajshahi area, is also known as *anarasi* in Magura and *ghar hashia* in Kushtia. This stitch resembles the **Holbein stitch**, so called because of its appearance in a portrait by Holbein.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that the stitch entered Bengal with the advent of Muslims. This stitch has been called an "Islamic stitch," because it is popular in North Africa and entered Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries.<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the stitch entered Bengal with the advent of Muslims or later with Europeans. The *lik* stitch is a spaced running stitch. In working it, a number of parallel rows of running stitches are taken. The stitches, the spaces between one stitch and the next, and the spaces between the rows of stitches are equal. Depending on the pattern, the rows of stitches parallel those of the previous row, alternate, or are a combination of parallel and alternating rows. After the required number of rows have been worked, the kantha is turned, and rows of running stitches are taken to join the previous rows. Different patterns emerge from variations of parallel and alternating rows.

The *lik phor* in Jessore and Faridpur is often used along with other stitches. The *lik* kanthas of Rajshahi, however,

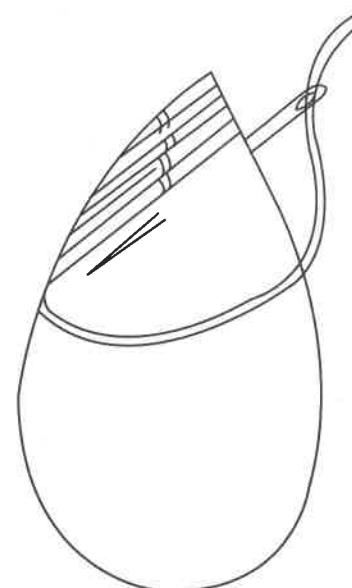


Detail of Lutfunnessa Begum's *jainamaz* showing use of *lik phor/anarasi*, *kaitya*, *chatai*, *chain*, and *kantha phor*

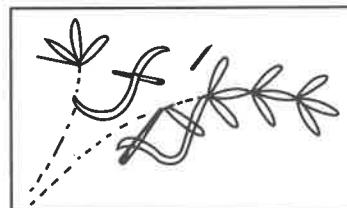
<sup>19</sup> This term was used by members of the Chapai Nawabganj Kalyani Sangstha.

<sup>20</sup> In the *Meyer Madaonna* (1528), Anna Meyer, in profile, is shown wearing a dress with collar and sleeve adorned with four double-running stitch patterns.

<sup>21</sup> "A Stitch through Time: The Journey of an Islamic Embroidery Stitch to Europe and the New World," exhibition organized at The Textile Museum, Washington D.C., May 27-October 16, 1994.



Bhorat phor or  
Romanian stitch



Fern stitch

use only this stitch throughout, often using either white or green yarn to embroider the *lik* pattern on red *salu*. For the past several years, Nari Kalyan Sangstha at Magura had been making quilts and counterpanes using red, green or blue yarn to work this pattern on a white background. The stitches were large and bold. Recently, however, the group has started using the lazy daisy joined by rows of running stitches. Elsewhere, the stitches tend to be smaller and are worked in a variety of colours, thereby producing a result often quite different from that produced by this work in the Rajshahi *lik kanthas* or Magura *anarasi* kanthas. A *jainamaz*, prayer rug, made by Lutfunnessa Begum shows the use of this stitch in association with other kantha stitches.

While the running stitch, in its different variations, is the basic kantha stitch, a variety of other stitches may also be found in kanthas. Some of these stitches suggest a North Indian influence, others a European one.

The *bhorat phor* or Romanian stitch is one of the most popular stitches, particularly in the Kumudini, Arshi, and St. Paul Sewing Centre kanthas. Because it is not an indigenous stitch, it was referred to as the *Kashmiri bhorat* by kantha-workers at Kumudini. It is, however, generally known simply as *bhorat*, filling. This stitch produces the effect of three stitches, but is really a combination of two. A large stitch is taken and then a second small one is taken at a slant in the middle to hold the stitch down. If the area to be covered is big, larger stitches are taken and then held down by two or three stitches. The *bhorat* stitch is a very suitable stitch to embroider large areas where solid colour is wanted.

The *fern* stitch is not common to kanthas. However, in a number of kanthas, the *kalka* is embroidered in this stitch, and resembles the pattern of Kashmiri shawls.

The *stem* or *dal phor* is also occasionally found in kanthas. Worked from left to right, regular small stitches are taken along the line of the design. After each stitch is taken, the needle emerges on the left side of the previous stitch. While a double row of running stitches is often used to outline motifs—occasionally in strands of different coloured yarn—the *stem* or *dal phor* is also used for this

purpose, especially in the newer kanthas. The stem is also sometimes used to fill a motif, producing an effect of solid colour.

The **arrowhead**, composed of two straight stitches meeting at an angle, is used in various ways. It is a quick way to fill motifs which are then neither heavily embroidered nor left without embroidery. It is also used to produce a variety of border patterns, either alone or combined with other stitches.

The **herringbone** is not very common in the Rajshahi or Jessore areas, but is often used in Rangpur and Jamalpur. Together with other stitches, it helps create a number of delicate-looking borders. Referred to as the "Gujrati" stitch, closely worked herringbone stitches are used to fill motifs in Santiniketan kantha saris. The stitch can be worked fairly quickly to create expanses of colour.

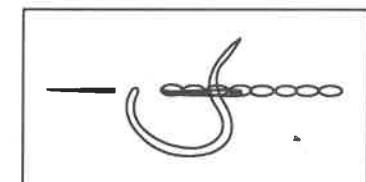
The **satin stitch** is also seen in the embroidery of the kantha, but generally for foreign motifs rather than indigenous ones. In Mosammat Zamira Khatoon's kantha, for example, displayed at the Aarong exhibition, "The Story of Stitches" organized at the Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka from July 15-29, 2008, the artist had embroidered roses, leaves, bouquets in satin stitch. The satin stitch is also used successfully to embroider some very typical kantha motifs, blending into the kantha tradition.

The **buttonhole stitch** is often used to edge small kanthas but also to embroider *kadamba* motifs.

The **bahkya** or **back stitch** resembles machine stitching, and is the stitch employed, even today, to stitch garments by hand. In this stitch the needle is brought out of the cloth a stitch length ahead of the stitch worked. The needle is then taken back along the line and again brought out of the fabric a stitch length ahead. The back stitch was most commonly used to embroider the Indo-Portuguese quilts and is today most closely associated with the Rajshahi *sujnis* which resemble these quilts except that they are done on red *salu* and consist almost entirely of geometrical patterns or arabesque designs. It is a very appropriate stitch for embroidering the curving outlines of the sensitively drawn floral and leaf motifs. It is also occasionally used to embroider outlines of motifs in other kanthas.



Herringbone stitch



Back stitch

The cross stitch is, like the back stitch, occasionally found in kanthas other than those made in Rajshahi, often combining with other stitches to produce a variety of border patterns. It is, however, most prominently found in the Rajshahi cross stitch kanthas. The cross stitch is the latest stitch in the kantha repertory and, though not quite merging with the kantha tradition, kept the tradition alive when the original form had disappeared from public view. The cross stitch is called the *tin phor* in Chapai Nawabganj because three movements of the needle are necessary to complete the stitch.

The older kanthas often use a variety of embroidery stitches, as Kramrisch points out, but the finest of old kanthas wrested a variety of effects from a dexterous manipulation of the running stitch. The Crafts Council of West Bengal has, for the last fifteen years, been examining the old pieces available in the Indian museums and attempting to replicate their rich variety and ingenious effects.

## Different Kantha Articles

While kanthas generally denote quilts used as wrappers, all articles made by quilting old cloth may also be referred to by the same generic name. However, depending on the size of the kantha and its purpose, we may divide kanthas into various articles, each with its own specific name.

Kanthas for use as spreads and coverlets are referred to as *sujni* kanthas by both Dutt<sup>1</sup> and Kramrisch.<sup>2</sup> Manada Sundari, in her dedication to her father, refers to her kantha as *sujni*: *Ei sajni jangalbadhal nibasi barada kanta basur kanya ami shrimati manadasundari dasya moma haste prastut purbak sri yut pita thakur mahashayeke ei sajni pranam purbak dilam shabhyagan mahashayera ye triti hay map kariben.* (This *sujni* was made by the own hands of the humble Manadasundari in honour of her father Baradakanta Basu of Jangalbadhal. Gentlemen may kindly forgive.) *Sujni*, which comes from the Persian word *sozni*, meaning "of the needle" or "embroidered," is also commonly used instead of the term "kantha" in the district of Murshidabad and in Bihar.<sup>3</sup> But in Bangladesh, *sujnis* are generally associated with a distinct type of quilt—with a surface of red *salu* and worked in white back stitches and are therefore considered separately from the kantha. However, the term "*sujni kantha*" may be used for kanthas used as coverlets.

In order to distinguish between ordinary kanthas and embroidered ones, the term "*nakshi kantha*" is used for the

<sup>1</sup> "The Art of Kantha," 458.

<sup>2</sup> "Kantha," 36.

<sup>3</sup> Embroidered spreads are known as "suzani" in Uzbekistan.

latter. Occasionally, the phrase “*phul kantha*” is also used to describe embroidered kanthas. As Chapai Nawabganj, the term “*kantha*” refers to embroidered quilts, while the term “*gadla*” is used for roughly stitched ones. With the popularity of Jasim Uddin’s poem, the term “*nakshi kantha*” has become synonymous with embroidered quilts. Dinesh Chandra Sen, G. S. Dutt and Stella Kramrisch do not speak of *nakshi kanthas*, being content with the word “*kantha*.”

G. S. Dutta classifies kanthas into seven: *lep*, *sujni*, *bostani*, *durjani*, *arshilata*, *wad*, and *rumal* depending on size and purpose. In addition, there are articles associated with the Muslim life-style: *jainamaz*, *dastarkhan*, *basan dhakar rumal*, and *gilaf*—a slightly larger version of the *durjani*. Dutta does not use *asan* as a separate category—incorporating *asan* in *sujni*. However, Mohammad Sayeedur preferred to use *asan* as an additional category. He also referred to a few others such as *khat khanta* and *palkir topor*. Tofail Ahmed suggested an addition: *khicha*, a type of bag made by gathering the four corners. Kanthas may, therefore, be divided into the following categories based on size and purpose.

*Sujni* kanthas, for use as coverlets, measure about 5 feet by 6 feet.

*Lep* kanthas are thicker kanthas, meant for use in winter. The word *lep*, is the term used for cotton padded quilts in Bengal and is a mutation of the word *lehaf*. As many as seven saris, might go into the making of a *lep* kantha, whereas three to four saris are sufficient for a thinner kantha. *Lep* kanthas are also somewhat larger than ordinary kanthas, measuring about  $5\frac{1}{2}$  feet by  $6\frac{1}{2}$  feet. Even when *lep* kanthas are embroidered, the embroidery tends to be simpler than on kanthas used as spreads and coverlets. Often *kalkas* are worked in the four corners and occasionally a central lotus is also added.

*Asan* kanthas are smaller square or rectangular kanthas used as spreads for *puja*, the Hindu prayer ceremony, or for eating special guests or a bridegroom. For example, a kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection notes that the *asan*, spelled *ason* in this case, was meant for the bridegroom to

sit on: “*Badshar boshibar ason*.<sup>4</sup> Asans are among the most exquisite of all kantha work, containing a wealth of motifs and pictorial representations. G. S. Dutta does not categorize *asan* separately.

*Jainamaz*, or Muslim prayer rugs, are also made in kantha work. While some are fairly simple, others reproduce the traditional designs of prayer rugs, with a floral border and a mosque where the forehead touches it in *sijda* or obeisance.

The *bayton*, *bostani*, or *gatri* was a square kantha meant for keeping books or other valuables. Like the *arshilata*, the *bostani* has a tassel in one corner to tie the bundle. Even today, Bengali women tend to wrap up their valuable silk saris in a piece of cloth before putting them away in the almirah or closet.

The *arshilata* was a small rectangular kantha used for wrapping toilet articles such as a comb and *arshi* or mirror. It had a tassel at one end so that the articles could be rolled up and tied.

The *oar*, *balish kantha*, *balisher oshar* or *balisher chapa* is a small square or rectangular kantha meant to be placed on top of a pillow. Bengalis use hair oil that soils pillows. These kanthas prevented this soiling. Today they have been generally replaced by small towels. At Chapai Nawabganj these small kanthas are referred to as *tuwalley*, literally towels.<sup>5</sup>

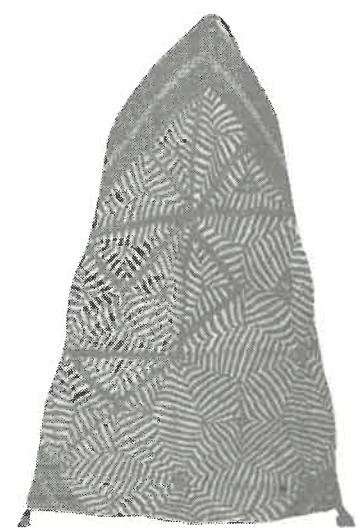
The *gilaf* was an envelope-shaped kantha meant for covering the Quran. Three corners of the *gilaf* were stitched together and to the fourth was stitched a tassel. A smaller version of this was the *batua*, *durjani* or *thalia* used as a wallet or to wrap betel leaves.

<sup>4</sup> Literally, these words mean “A seat for the king to sit.” The term “badshah,” “king”—the Muslim equivalent of raja—is used here to refer to the bridegroom, who is often referred to in the Muslim community as *naushah*, new king.

<sup>5</sup> While towels are associated in the western mind with bathing, in Bengal most people who are not completely westernized use the handloom *gamchha* for this purpose. And, ironically, towels are draped on the backs of chairs to function as antimacassars in offices. At Santiniketan, during a Bengal Art Conference in February 2009, the backs of the chairs placed for the speakers at the inaugural session were draped with towels.



Gilaf



Gilaf

The *dastarkhan* was a long narrow kantha meant to spread for an eating place. It tended to be about 10" to 18" wide. The length varied, depending on the number of persons who were to use it. Like the *jainamaz* and the *gilaf*, the *dastarkhan* is an example of Muslim influence on the kantha.

The *rumal* or handkerchief kantha is a small square kantha. Mohammad Sayeedur suggests that *rumals* were presented to bride and groom during the wedding ceremony.<sup>6</sup> These small kanthas were also used for covering dishes, in which case they would be referred to as *basan dhakar rumal*, kerchiefs to cover dishes.

Other kanthas include the *khicha*, a small square kantha stitched to give several sections, and a *pan pechani*, a small rectangular kantha to wrap betel leaves.

A number of small kanthas were also associated with the palanquin. The *palkir topor* was placed on top of the palanquin and the *khat* kantha where the passenger sat.

Children's kanthas range from very small ones for the newborn to larger ones for toddlers. Even families that have stopped stitching kanthas for any of the above purposes still stitch them for newborn children and toddlers. Old cloth serves two purposes: one practical, the other magical. In its practical aspect, padded old cloth is absorbent and very comfortable for a small baby. When infant mortality was high, the newborn child was neither dressed in new clothes nor were clothes stitched before he or she was actually born. The fear was that new clothes would attract the evil eye and the child would die. If the child were dressed in rags, this would show a seeming neglect and hence no jealousy would be elicited and the child would be safe.<sup>7</sup> With better chances for the newborn child, with the ready availability of plastic pants, of towels, of Pampers and Huggies, embroidered children's kanthas have gone out of fashion, especially in urban areas. While

at home some mothers still use kanthas made of soft old cloth for their children, when they go out, they swaddle the child in a factory-made towel. However, with a growing interest in kanthas, attractive children's kanthas are at present offered for sale at handicraft outlets. At Aarong, for instance, small kanthas for babies—using traditional motifs or "baby" motifs such as toy cars and trains—are available in the children's section.

Today newer uses are being found for kanthas, with a whole new range of products being made based on kantha work. Thus, among the popular new uses of the kantha are saris, kurtas,<sup>8</sup> bedspreads, wall-hangings, drapes, cushion covers, ladies' purses, spectacles cases, place mats, jewellery boxes, dress fronts, skirt borders, shawls. Many of these items develop from traditional uses. Thus a place mat is a modernized version of a *dastarkhan*, as a cushion cover is of an *asan*. Some are, however, new uses. As, for example, sari embroidery based on kantha work. The most innovative use of the kantha is, however, in the wall-hanging. Whereas the other uses are more or less utilitarian, the wall-hanging is purely ornamental. It has also effected the greatest change stylistically in the kantha. Meant to be viewed from the front, the wall-hanging has a top and a bottom, unlike the older kanthas where the focal point was the central lotus.

<sup>6</sup> "Nakshi Kantha Art," *Bangla Academy Journal*, Janunary-June 1992: 6.

<sup>7</sup> It is the same belief that causes a much desired child to be named *Pocha*, the rotten one, or *Dukkhu*, the unfortunate—as the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was named.

<sup>8</sup> Generally referred to as "punjabi."

## Kantha Motifs

A casual glance at kanthas reveals a plethora of images, of flowers and leaves, of birds and fish, of human figures and animal forms, of kitchen utensils and toilet articles. But, as we look longer and closer, these sift into some sort of order. As Heinz Mode and Subodh Chandra point out, "the composition as a whole may display a certain type of symmetry....<sup>1</sup>" Even though this symmetry is not always strict, and even though there was allowance for spontaneity, and despite the multitude of motifs and pictorial representations and the appearance of being unplanned, a finely embroidered kantha will always have a focal point. At the centre of most kanthas is a lotus. Around the lotus there are undulating vines or floral motifs or sari border patterns. Occasionally, the outer-most border round the lotus is not circular but square. In the corners of this square, floral motifs or *kalkas* are embroidered, pointing toward the central lotus. The four corners of the kantha also usually have tree-of-life motifs or *kalkas*. There is also an outer border. Often, a number of different *par* patterns are embroidered to create a broad border. The empty space between the central motif and the corner motifs is filled up with motifs ranging from vegetal, animal, and human motifs to agricultural implements and common domestic objects. Symbolic motifs juxtapose scenes from myths or from contemporary life. The kantha-maker did not try to be representational. Every available space between the lotus and the corner motifs was filled with motifs, symbols, and scenes, with size and colour

<sup>1</sup> *Indian Folk Art*, tr. from the German by Peter and Betty Ross (Bombay, 1985), 225.



Kantha from Manikganj

being guided by the imagination of the artist. Themes from legends juxtapose scenes of contemporary life, and both are often permeated with symbolic meanings.

There is a sense of unity and harmony in the kantha which can also be seen in the blending of motifs belonging to many cultures and many waves of influence. There are traditional Indian motifs handed down from the early civilization of the Indus Valley; there are also motifs ranging from the farthest western fringes of the Asiatic continent to its farthest eastern ones. Indigenous motifs blend with foreign ones and traditional motifs with contemporary pictorial representations.

Thus the central lotus motif is reminiscent of the ritualistic *alpana*. At the same time, the irradiating petals of the *satadal padma*, or hundred-petalled lotus, and the *sahasradal padma* or thousand-petalled lotus, also resemble the central motifs on the domed ceilings of Persian mosques. At the corners of the kantha are trees-of-life similar to the tree-of-life motif in Persian carpets. *Kalkas*, or paisleys, are reminiscent of Kashmiri shawls, but they might also be drawn from the Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang, the symbol of man and woman.<sup>2</sup>

Kramrisch notes how some motifs in the kantha may be found in other traditions. "The symbols stored in the kantha belong to the primeval images in which man beholds the universe."<sup>3</sup> The solar motif, the lotus motif, the water motif and the earth motif are common to different races and different times. The lotus motif is a ubiquitous one: it ranges from China to Iran and is very much at home in India. The tree-of-life motif is as common in Iran as it is in the kanthas of Bengal.

Water plays a symbolic role in almost all religions; we may note here the baptismal rites of Christianity, *Gangasnan* or bathing in the Ganges in Hinduism, *wuzu* or ablutions in Islam. It is not surprising, then, that the water motif should be found in the kantha, in the ripples of the surface of the Jessore kanthas, in the fish motif, in the *lohoi* design of the Rajshahi kantha, in the *beki* or wave designs of the Jessore border. The sun, too, plays a part in religion: in the fire symbolism of the Zoroastrians, in the early morning prayer of Hinduism. The lotus symbol combines in itself both the sun and the water symbols.

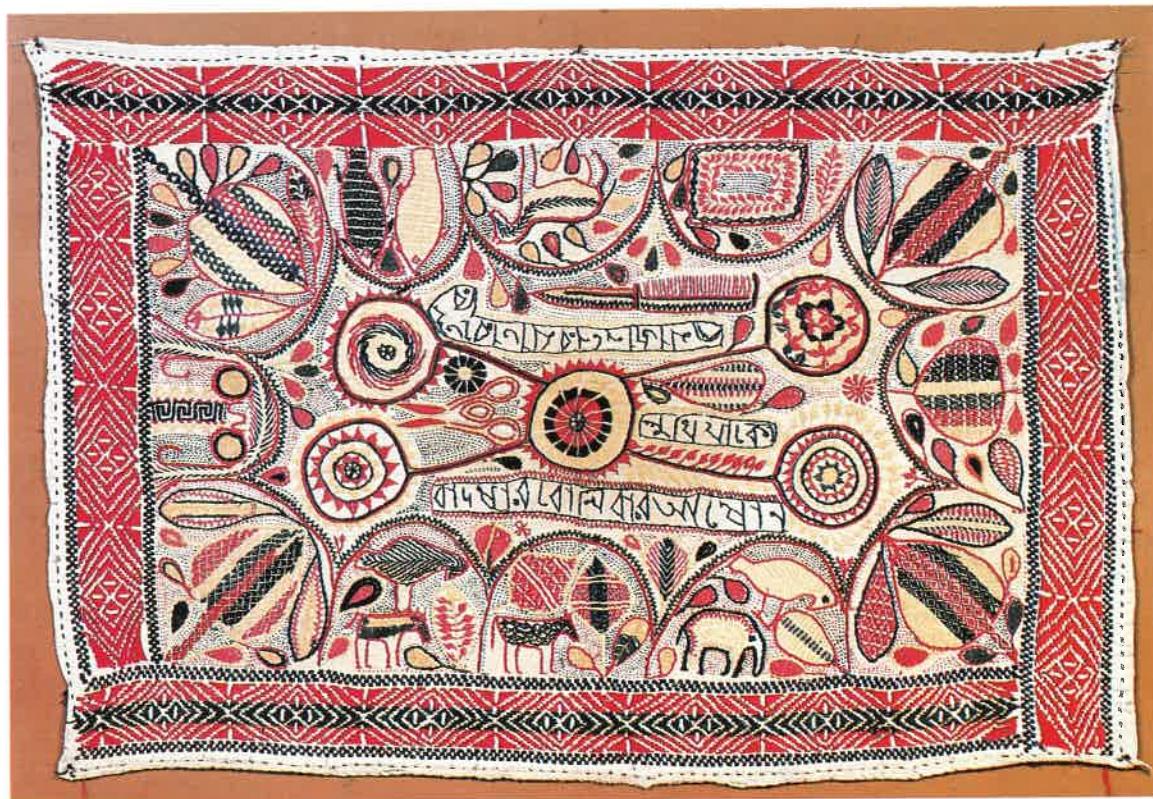
There are also, in the kantha, several motifs that we do not find elsewhere, created as they were from the environment and culture of Bengal. When the kantha-maker needed motifs, she looked around her and embroidered whatever she saw. But she also embroidered what she desired, not only for herself but also for the loved one for whom she was embroidering the kantha. She embroidered

<sup>2</sup> N. Fokker, *Persian and Other Oriental Carpets for Today* (London, 1973), 30.

<sup>3</sup> "Kantha," 53.



Manada Sundari's kantha. The inscription in Bangla translates: "This sujni was made by Manada Sundari with her own hands for her father Baradakanta Basu of Jangalbadhal." Gurusaday Museum



Asan kantha for bridegroom with inscriptions reading "Badshar boshibar ashon," "Majaner matar toiri" and "Sukhi thako." Zainul Abedin Collection

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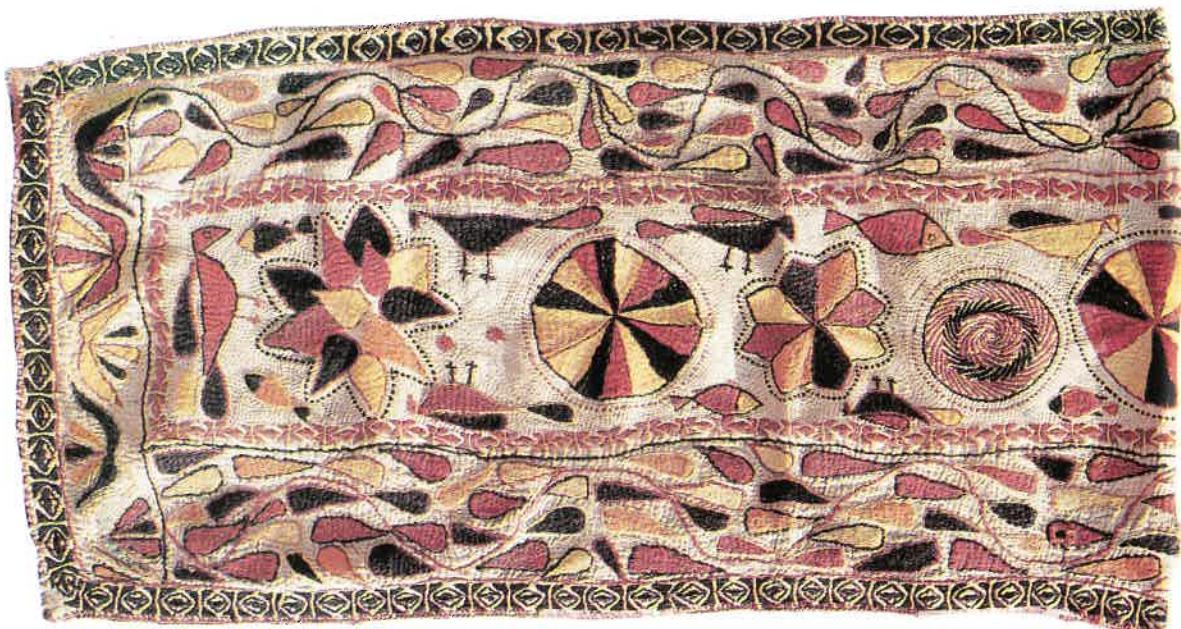


Cross stitch kantha made by Parul in the Bengali year 1359, corresponding to 1952 of the Christian era. The Bengali script translates: "Gaya, Kashi, Brindaban are nothing to me/A woman's existence is at her husband's feet." Bangladesh National Museum

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Barten dhakuni or plate cover



Section of arshilata from Nilphamari district

the *kula*, the winnowing fan, or the *beri*, a pair of tongs, circular at one end to go round a pot, not only because they were objects familiar to her, but because they were associated with harvests and brimming pots. She embroidered leaves and fish, not only because she lived in a green land crisscrossed with many rivers, but also because she had seen them carved in temple reliefs.

The kitchen utensils, harvesting implements, natural forms, both animal and vegetal, which find their place in the kantha, reflect not only the life of a people but also their hopes and aspirations. As A. K. Coomaraswamy points out, "Indian art is always a language employing symbols valid only by tradition and convention."<sup>4</sup>

In an article on "Kalpavrksa," V. S. Agrawala notes the importance of symbolic language in Indian art:

Indian art conveys its meaning in a distinct symbol language. The lotus, the full vase (*purnaghata*), the svastika, the wheel (*cakra*), the three jewels (*triratna*), and the *kalpavrksa*, part as it were of an alphabet, are being used with perfect mastery as elements of decoration; they have not only invested art, Buddhist and Brahmanic, with endless beauty but also show it as a vehicle of ideas.... Their meaning was engrained in the consciousness of the people and the art connoisseur carried within him a subconscious reaction to these symbolic forms which intensified his appreciation of an art which was rich both in external narration as well as inward meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Bharata also suggests the importance of symbols: "Employing symbols like the tree, foot print, the wheel and the stupa, Indian art was not using abstract unintelligible emblems that needed expansion. They had grown directly out of the life of the people and their ancient customs, and their significance as symbols was well understood."<sup>6</sup>

While kanthas employ motifs common to other cultures, and to all Indian art, there are some motifs that are common only to the kantha (and to the other arts which are wholly women's art). This is so because kanthas, are the work of women, unlike the traditional paintings or

<sup>4</sup> *Introduction to Indian Art* (Delhi, 1969), 28.

<sup>5</sup> "Kalpavrksa: The Wish Fulfilling Tree," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. 11, (1943), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Indian Art: A Short Introduction* (Bombay, 1958), 12.



Chawkandi tomb, Karachi, with bangles, earrings and necklace

sculpture and even embroideries done all over India by men. This element may be termed the female element in the kantha. Among the numerous recurrent images, for example, are also articles of daily feminine use: mirrors, combs, betel-cutters, earrings, fish cutters; a *kajal lata*, a *kula*, etc. What place do these toilet articles, these kitchen implements, have in a quilt?

Very simply, these articles were objects desired by the women who embroidered the kanthas. In the *alpana* too, as Tapan Mohan Chatterjee points out, these motifs "are a true picture of the woman's heart—her desires, fancies and imagination—a great worship of life unlike the dead ceremonial worship alleged to be based on the scriptures."<sup>7</sup>

The toilet articles and the earrings are objects used by a married woman and are thus associated with the married state. It is interesting to note that the association of earrings with womanhood is also to be found in the Chawkandi tombs of Sind, where graves of women are ornamented with earrings and bangles. From being actual articles of daily use, these motifs become symbols of the married state, prayers for happiness in marriage. In the same way, the palanquin, a common mode of travel in the past, becomes associated with marriage. The mother embroidering a quilt for her daughter would embroider a palanquin, symbolic of the marriage palanquin that would sometime take her daughter to her husband's home. In one kantha it is interesting to note that there are two palanquins. A close observation will reveal that one contains a female figure, the other a male; the unknown kantha artist has portrayed a marriage procession.

The *dheki* or the husking machine, and the *kula* or winnowing fan are not only articles used in the kitchen or the homestead; they become symbols of material and agricultural, prosperity.<sup>8</sup> They become prayers for plenty, for the fertility of the fields. Apart from these agricultural implements, there are motifs drawn from nature: the tree

<sup>7</sup> *Alpona* (Calcutta, 1965), 4.

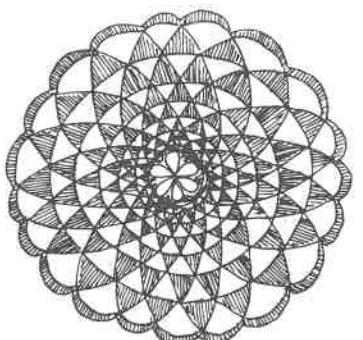
<sup>8</sup> The *kula* is used to lay various items on it at the *gaye holud* or turmeric ceremony or to welcome a new bride to her home.

motif, creepers, birds of different types, horses and elephants. These too are linked to prayers for prosperity. The fish becomes a symbol of fertility. Most of these are common motifs in kanthas, but sometimes a woman will portray something desired by her for herself or for the person for whom she is embroidering the kantha. An example of this may be seen in a Jessore kantha in the Zainul Abedin Collection, where, in the central panel, the kantha maker has embroidered what she prays for her son: a bicycle, an umbrella, a hurricane lamp, an inkpot.

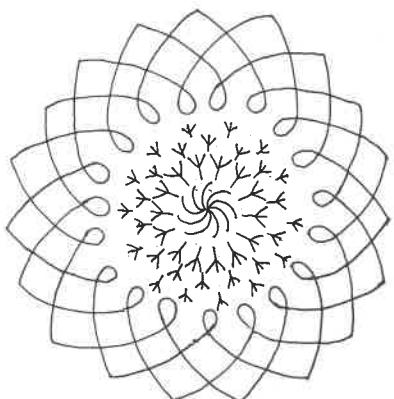
While most of these symbols are naturalistic in form—though not in colour, as colour is used quite indiscriminately, with blue leaves, green fish, etc.—there are some symbols which are abstract in form. Lakshmi's footprints, for instance, while originally a detailed footprint as may still be seen in *alpana* designs, is an abstract symbol which is often used in kanthas. On the other hand, the swastika, or *shostir chinho*, an abstract symbol, becomes a naturalistic one, often resembling a flower with curved petals. Geometric motifs are popular in the traditional Rajshahi *lohor* kanthas. Ajit Mookerjee points out that even geometric motifs may have symbolic meanings. "Geometrical forms dominate the whole range of Indian symbolism, particularly in Tantric designs and formulas."<sup>9</sup> Do the Rajshahi triangular forms convey any symbolic meanings? Are these forms linked to the mountain-water mythology of the Santals and Oraons who inhabit the north-western regions of Bangladesh?

Since most women desire the same things—personal beauty, conjugal happiness, strong healthy children—almost every kantha breathes the same prayer. But individual differences are to be seen. One comes across a kantha where an unusually artistic woman has embroidered a variety of exquisite flowers. In another the unknown artist reveals her keen observation. She has looked around her and drawn all that she has seen: parrots and monkeys, a train and a marriage procession. She sees nothing incongruous in embroidering a palanquin beside a steaming train. A

<sup>9</sup> *Tantra Art* (Basel, 1971), 13.



Lotus



Lotus

later kantha artist will, in the same way, embroider traditional motifs alongside the most modern machines, a palanquin beside an aeroplane.

While most kanthas have some initial pattern, none of the finest kanthas proceed exactly according to a set pattern. Traditional motifs are repeated, but in an endless variety of stitches and colours and shapes, and always some touch of the individual is revealed. Some motifs are recurrent, and a brief note on the more common ones is perhaps useful.

**The Lotus Motif.** The lotus motif is found from distant times, scattered over vast areas ranging from China in the east to Persia in the west. It is to be found in the palace of Darius at Persepolis as it is in the stone columns of Asoka. It is the seat of the gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology, as well as the seat of the Buddha. Coomaraswamy does not think the lotus, along with other such motifs, entered India in the Mauryan period as many writers on Indian art suggest.<sup>10</sup> He feels that these motifs must have been common to pre-Mauryan art. His reason is that if pre-Mauryan had been very different, it would have left some of its traces in Mauryan and later art, the Indian artist being a traditional one. It is because of this traditional attitude that the lotus and other Persian motifs could have become so popular, because they must have already been common to Indian art. There was, Coomaraswamy thinks, a common culture, a common early Asiatic art which has left its effects on the shores of Hellas, Phoenicia, Egypt, India and China. The common motifs, of which the lotus is one, must therefore, he says, be regarded as cognates rather than as borrowings.

The lotus motif is associated with Hindu iconography and thus is also popular in the kantha. Generally speaking, it is the divine seat, but it is also symbolic of cosmic harmony and essential womanhood. Thus, as Agrawala notes, the lotus is the divine seat. It is "the prime symbol of creation."<sup>11</sup> Just as the lotus floats on the surface of the

<sup>10</sup> *Introduction to Indian Art*, 1-20.

<sup>11</sup> "Kalpavrksa," 1.

water, so did the created cosmos emerge on the surface of primeval chaos. The lotus represents the life-giving powers of water but is also associated with the sun, at whose rising it expands and opens its petals, at whose setting it contracts and closes them. The lotus is a symbol of eternal order, of cosmic harmony, of the union of earth, water and sky. As Wajeda Begum of Magura told me, the lotus has its roots in the earth, its leaves and flowers float on the surface of the water, and its opening and closing depend on the sun. It is also a symbol of the recreating powers of life. When the water dries up, the lotus seems to die; but with the rains it springs almost miraculously to life again.<sup>12</sup>

The lotus is associated with purity and the goddess Lakshmi. "All of India's back country is the dominion of Lakshmi, the goddess of the lotus."<sup>13</sup> And this is no wonder: "She is the embodiment of beauty and splendor, of dignity and glory, of good fortune and wealth, of graciousness and prosperity."<sup>14</sup> She is life itself. The lotus goddess is also the goddess of good fortune. She is the presiding goddess of *dhan* (paddy) which is wealth in India. She is the goddess of abundance. She is the goddess of the earth.

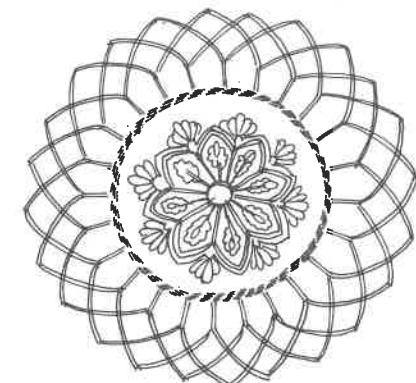
Lakshmi is embodied in the lotus, but the lotus is more than these qualities; it is also the symbol of the essential woman. As Curt Maury points out, "Though itself of ancient inception, the lotus emblem appears to have been an elaboration of a preexistent design: a floral figuration of the circle, always and everywhere the elementary ideograph of the female organs, subsumed in India by the term *yoni* ... the lotus has come to represent the ultimate equation of female being and female magic."<sup>15</sup> The break in tradition and the often mindless imitation of older kanthas result in strange incongruities. Thus, one of the reproductions of the Gaja-Lakshmi kantha in the Zainul Abedin collection shows a nude male in the *tri-bhang* pose in the centre of the *mandala* being bathed by elephants.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, May 1979.

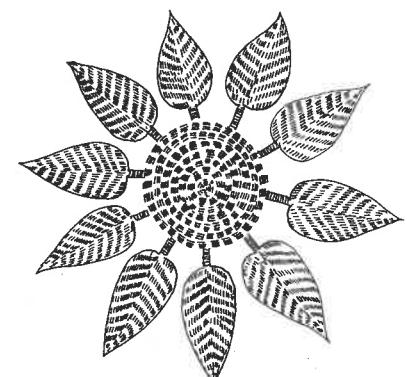
<sup>13</sup> Curt Maury, *Folk Origins of Indian Art* (New York, 1969), 101.

<sup>14</sup> Maury, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Maury, 101.

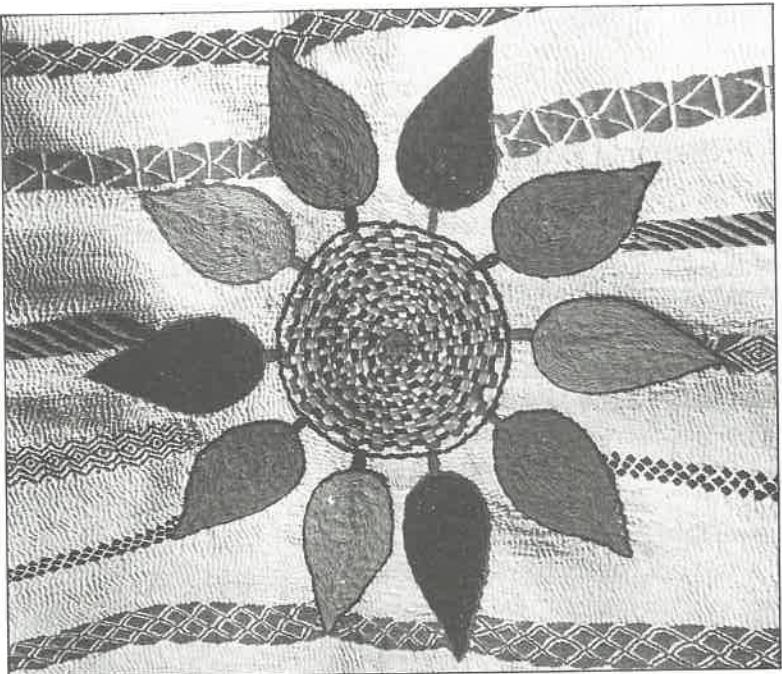


Lotus

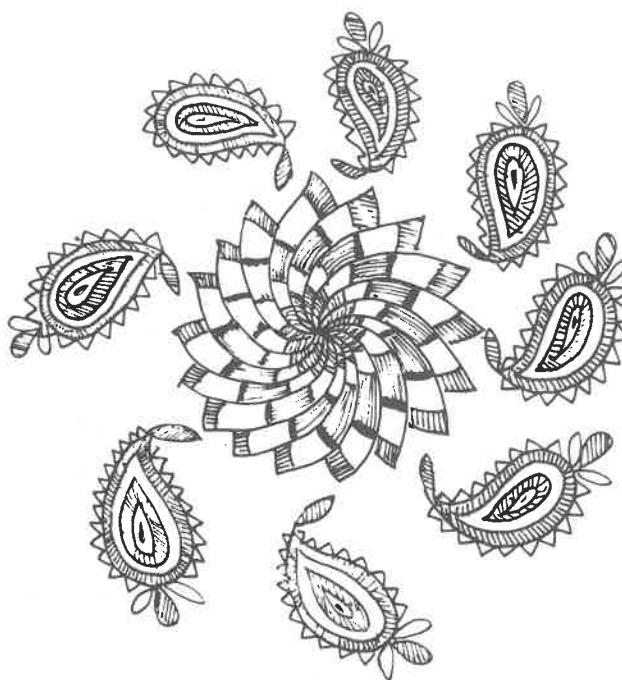


Lotus

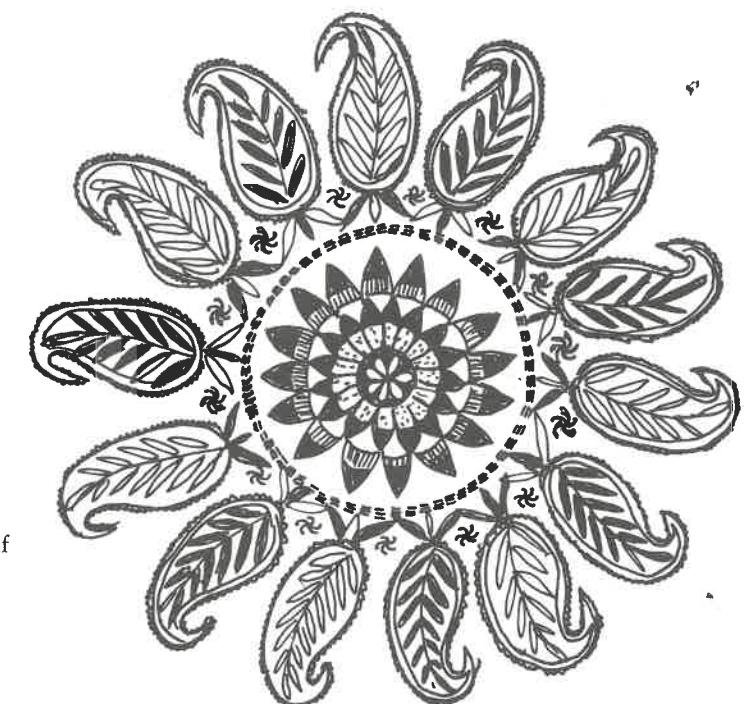
There are many forms that the lotus takes, ranging from the eight-petalled *astadal padma* to the *satadal* or hundred-petalled lotus. In the older kanthas the central motif is almost always a fully bloomed lotus seen from above. The



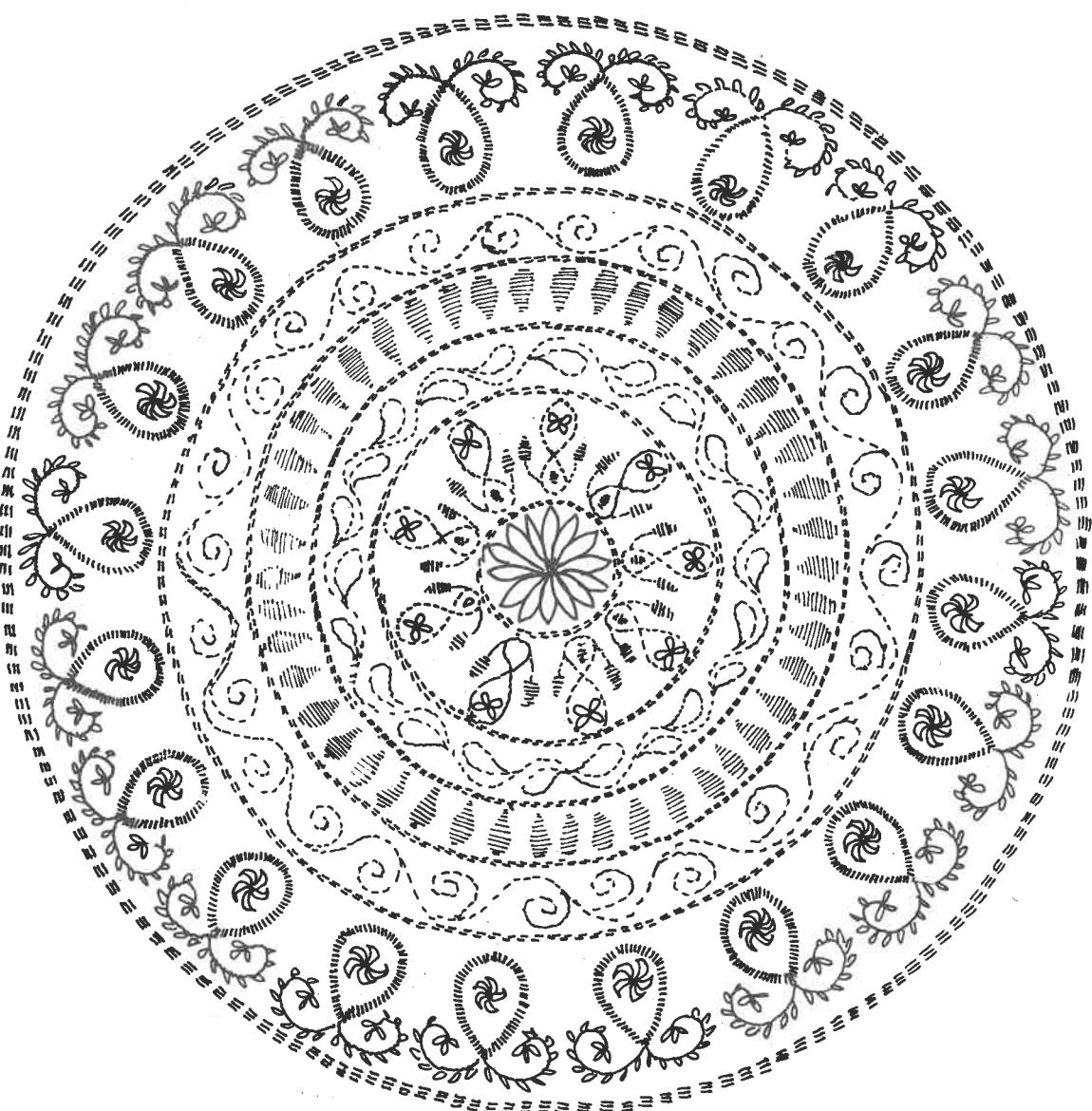
Central lotus with ten petals rather than the more usual eight



Lotus with *kalka* motif



Lotus with *kalka* motif



Drawing based on a kantha in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, showing central lotus with undulating vines and concentric circles

centrality of the lotus to the kantha replicates its centrality in many *alpanas*. Thus when Purnoshashi Saha started to draw an *alpana* for some of us who had accompanied Mohammad Sayeedur, she first drew the central lotus.

**The Solar Motif.** The solar motif symbolizes the life-giving powers of the sun. "The sun indeed is life," says the *Arthavaveda*. The sun has been one of the first deities worshipped by the earliest peoples, and some remnants of this are still to be found in most religions. With the sun is associated fire, and not only the Zoroastrians gave a symbolic meaning to fire. Fire plays a prominent part in Hindu rites, religious and matrimonial. Easter is a spring festival, replacing a pagan solar festival. The importance of fire and light have not completely faded. A Muslim housewife will light a fire or switch on a light as soon as it is dark.

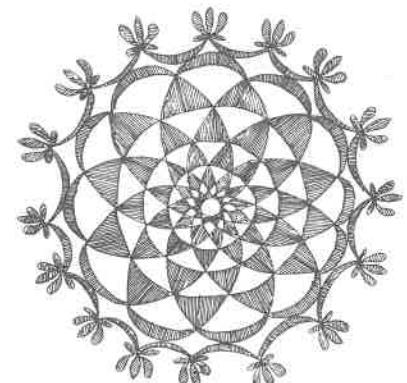
The sun motif is intimately associated with the lotus motif, and occasionally both motifs may be seen together in the centre of a kantha. However, the solar motif, like the lotus, has lost its religious overtones and continues to be embroidered in all kanthas regardless of the religion professed by the kantha-maker.

**The Moon Motif.** The moon motif has religious overtones which make it popular in Muslim kanthas. Usually in the form of a crescent, it is often accompanied by a star. A kantha in the Gurusaday Museum, embroidered by three generations of Muslim women, prominently displays this crescent-star motif. The moon motif with a star is popular in *jainamaz* kanthas.

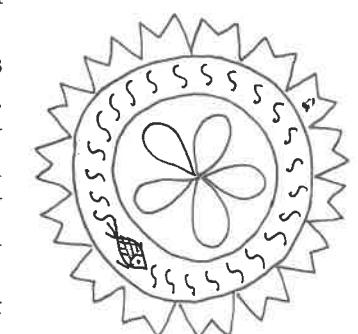
**The Chakra or Wheel Motif.** The wheel is a frequent symbol in Indian art, both Hindu and Buddhist. It is a symbol of order: "As spokes in the centre of a wheel, everything is established in life," say the *Upanishads*. The world is described as a wheel.

The wheel is a popular motif in kanthas, even when the kantha-maker has forgotten what the symbol represents. Its popularity is also partly due to the ease of its embroidery. With the kantha-maker simply working in *chatai* around the motif, the design is quickly completed.

**The Swastika Motif.** As a motif in Indian art, the swastika dates back to the Indus Valley civilization. Seals from Mohenjodaro have been found inscribed with this



Lotus



Solar-lotus motif with Lakshmi's footprints

motif. It is often associated with a moving wheel. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya describes it as being symbolic of eternal motion.<sup>16</sup> It is, to most who embroider it, an auspicious sign, a symbol of good fortune.

Part of the popularity of this motif, as with the wheel motif, stems from the ease of its embroidery. Working in *kaitya*, around a circle, the design is soon completed. Called *shostika* or *shostir chinho*, it is also known as *muchri* or *golok dhanda*. Often its resemblance with the swastika is missing, particularly as the motif has more arms than the usual four. The design is also more curvilinear than the four-armed swastika of the Mohenjodaro seal.

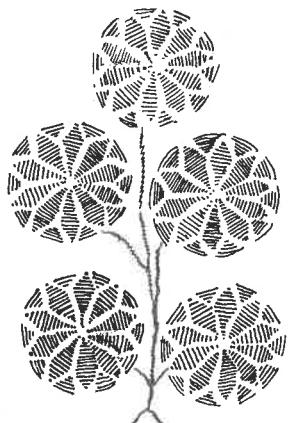
**The Tree-of-Life Motif.** This motif may also be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization. In *The Flowering of Indian Art*, Radhakamal Mukerjee points out that, "The Indus valley culture has contributed certain permanent elements to Indian culture and art."<sup>17</sup> Of these one important element is that of tree worship and vegetative fecundity. Mukerjee thinks, "It is likely that the Indus people conceived the pipal as the Tree of Life ... with the *devata* inside embodying the power of fecundity."<sup>18</sup> Even in Buddhist times this cult of trees continued, with the *pipal* being sacred to the Buddha because of the enlightenment he received in its shade. The tree-of-life motif is not peculiar to Indian art, as a glance westwards into Persian art reveals the presence of this motif in the earliest known periods.

In the kanthas, as in the *alpanas*, the tree-of-life motif appears with great frequency. Often it is replaced by a *kalka* or a leaf motif. It is usually to be found in the four corners, representing the four directions.<sup>19</sup>

The tree-of-life motif suggests the fecundity of nature and is therefore popular in an agrarian society dependent on nature. Vegetation has been associated with human fertility since time immemorial. In Indian sculptures may be seen closely entwined bodies of trees and women, as well as representations of trees sprouting from women's



Tree-of-life with human figure



Tree-of-life



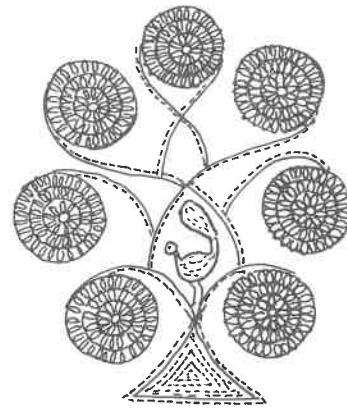
Kantha with tree-of-life motif. Note the use of *par* patterns for trunk and branches

<sup>16</sup> *Carpets and Floor Coverings of India* (Bombay, 1969), 16.

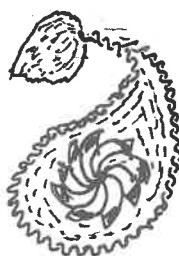
<sup>17</sup> *The Flowering of Indian Art* (Bombay, 1964), 34.

<sup>18</sup> *The Flowering of Indian Art*, 34.

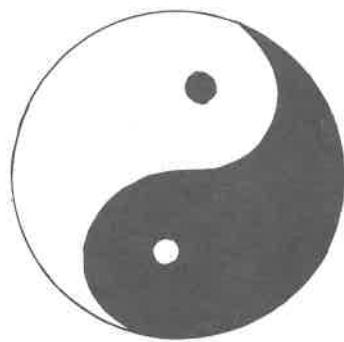
<sup>19</sup> Kramrisch "Kantha," 150.



Tree-of-life



Kalka



Yin-yang motif

navels. In symbolic rites women were married to trees. In Bengal the association of fertility and trees may be seen even today. In the *lagan* ceremony, a banana sapling is still given a prominent place, not only in marriages that take place in the countryside but also in urban areas.

Vines and creepers play an important part in both *alpanas* and *kanthas*. They contain the same symbolism as that of the tree-of-life. *Pan* or betel leaves are one of the items carried with the other gifts to the bride's house. Marriage *alpanas* include leaf and vine motifs as in the *Mangal Charaner Alpana*. In *kanthas*, too, the betel leaf or the *pipal* leaf is often to be found, either attached to undulating vines or in single motifs. A popular non-geometrical motif of the Rajshahi *lohoi* is the betel leaf.

**The Kalka Motif.** This is a latter-day motif, dating from Mughal times. It has, however, become very popular in the *kantha*. Its origins have been variously ascribed. It has been associated with pine trees, the curve representing the windswept pine tops. It has been compared to a stylized leaf; it has been compared to a mango, whose shape it resembles. Its similarity with a flame has been pointed out.<sup>20</sup> It is also similar to half the Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang, representing the union of man and woman.

The *kalka* is an attractive motif and lends itself to a variety of treatments. It can be worked in *chatai* or *kaitya*, blending in with the other motifs done in a traditional stitch. But often the embroidery of the *kalka* reminds us of its ancestry. For example, it is embroidered with flowers, much in the tradition of Kashmiri shawls. Often the stitch employed is also the fern stitch, popular in Kashmiri shawls.

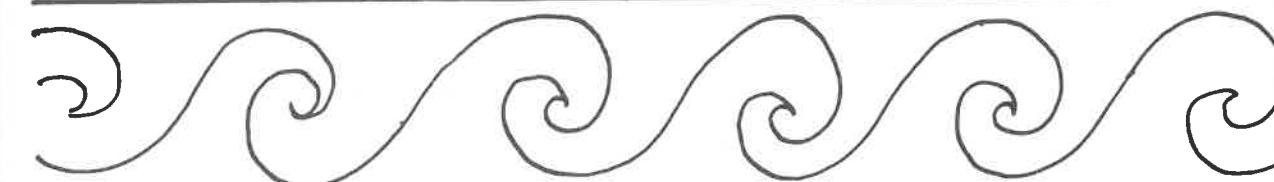
**The Water Motif.** This is an almost universal motif and is to be found in the *kantha* as well. This motif may be found in several patterns. The rippled field of the *kantha* surface itself symbolizes the rippled surface of water. Borders symbolic of waves such as the *beki* and the *sagar* or *shamuk taga* are popular in Jessore and Jamalpur *kanthas*. The Rajshahi *kanthas* are called *lohoi* after the wave motif. Apart from these motifs, there are other motifs associated with water: the boat, the fish, and the lotus.

<sup>20</sup> Enakshi Bhavnani, *Decorative Designs and Craftsmanship of India* (Bombay, 1974), 19.

**The Mountain Motif.** Mountain forms are suggested in both the *lohoi* and the *kautar khupi* motifs. In some Rangpur and Jamalpur *kanthas*, as well, the division of the field of the *kantha* into diamonds and triangles is suggestive of the mountain. The mountain is a symbol of the contact of earth and heaven.<sup>21</sup> Whether this meaning was intended by the women who embroidered the *kanthas* is not known, but there is no doubt that the myths and legends of the Santals and Oraons inhabiting this area are concerned with both the mountain and the waters. In their tradition, before the beginnings of this time, the Great Mountain stood alone above the waters. The Great Mountain was not the Creator, but he brought the first man and the first woman together in marriage.<sup>22</sup> In the subconscious mind some of this legend must have been retained. The *kantha* is associated with marriage, and this abstract motif suggests the union of the first man and woman. The *lohoi* is claimed to be the oldest type of *kantha* and it is not surprising that the water-mountain motif should be suggested in the pattern.

**The Fish Motif.** Fish figure prominently in marriage rites in Bengal. At the *lagan* ceremony, one of the main gifts taken to the bride's house is a large fish. The fish motif appears in both marriage *alpanas* as well as in the *kantha*.

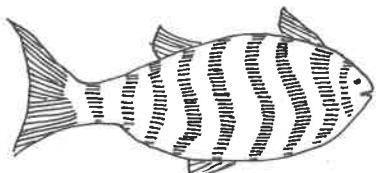
The reason for the popularity of the fish motif is not only its popularity as an article of food in a land of rivers, but also its fecundity. In an agricultural land many sons are prayed for, and the fish symbolizes this prayer.



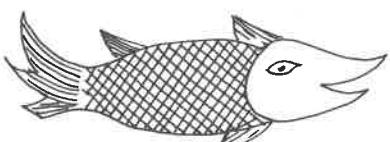
Sagar or shamuk taga

<sup>21</sup> Arthur U. Pope, *Persian Architecture* (New York, 1965), 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> W. W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (London, 1868).



Fish



Makara



Lakshmi's footprints

The fish portrayed in the kanthas is often a simply drawn fish, but occasionally its appearance is that of the *makara* associated with the statues of religious deities. Thus, apart from being a symbol of fecundity, the fish motif also becomes an auspicious sign, a sign of prosperity.

**The Boat Motif.** The boat is another popular motif in kanthas. It is not surprising that it should be so in a land crisscrossed by many rivers. But the boat becomes more than a depiction of a normal mode of travel: it becomes associated with all journeys from home. Thus in the *Bhaduli Brata Alpana*, a prayer for the safety of one's menfolk, the boat figures prominently. As A. Hauser points out, "A picture was both representation and the thing represented, both wish and wish fulfilment at the same time."<sup>23</sup> The drawing of the boat in the *alpana* and the embroidering of it in the kantha would ensure safe journeys for the men one loved: father, husband, son.

The boat was also associated with the story of Radha and Krishna. In the episode of the *naukabilas*, Radha and Krishna enjoy a boat ride, accompanied by *gopis*, milkmaidens. After the kantha revival, one particular boat motif seems to have become very popular: the *mayur pankhi* or peacock-prowed boat. Designed for a kantha for the newly built Hotel Sonargaon, this motif has been reproduced in countless wall-hangings.

**The Footprint Motif.** This is a common motif in Buddhist art, with footprints representing the footprints of the Buddha. In *alpanas* and kanthas, however, the footprints become symbolic of the goddess Lakshmi. The symbol has become a traditional one, and continues to be embroidered even when the motif has lost all similarity with a footprint.

**The Rath Motif.** The *rath* or chariot is associated with Vishnu or Jagannath. It does not carry the fearsome associations ascribed to it by Europeans. In fact, it is considered an auspicious sign. It is a popular motif in kanthas, especially in those embroidered by Hindu women. Some of these *raths* are very elaborately made, with images of Jagannath, his sister Subhadra, and their brother Balaram. Flags fly and birds hover above. In several, however, the representations hardly resemble a *rath*. Where

<sup>23</sup> *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 1, trans. Stanley Godman (London, 1952), 26.

the resemblance hardly exists, it is perhaps because the kantha artist embroidering the motif is only dimly aware of what she is portraying. She has perhaps seen this motif in a kantha and merely copied what she has seen. While the *rath* is a motif with Hindu associations, in a number of kanthas, a stylized *rath* appears alongwith a stylized mosque or *taziya*, which is made and used during *alam* processions of Shias in Moharram.

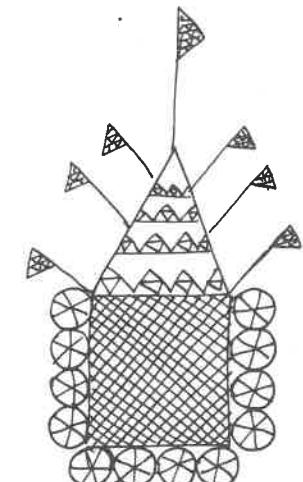
**The Mosque Motif.** This motif figures prominently in *jainamaz* kanthas, occurring towards the upper portion of the kantha where the forehead touches the ground in *sijda*. It also occasionally occurs in larger kanthas as well.

**The Panja or Open Palm Motif.** A favourite motif among Shias, the *panja* may occasionally be found in Bengal kanthas. Silver replicas of the *panja* are carried in Moharram processions that mourn the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson. The *panja* symbolizes the pentad of the Shias: the Prophet Mohammed himself; Ali, his son-in-law; Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and the wife of Ali; and Hasan and Hussain, the two sons of Ali and Fatima. It has also been pointed out to me that part of the popularity of the palm might stem from the ease of drawing it. Children love to place their hand palms down and trace around them. The palm on the kantha may therefore just be the handprint-signature of the maker.

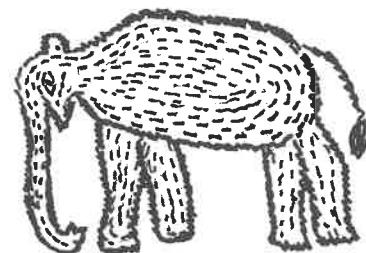
**Agricultural Implements.** The *kula* and sickle are motifs common to many kanthas. In an agricultural society these implements are part of every household. But again, these implements become symbolic, being associated with harvests. They stand for the plenty of the fields, for the prosperity of the household.

**Animal Motifs.** Elephants, horses, deer, tigers and monkeys figure in several kanthas. Part of the reason for the popularity of these motifs is, of course, the presence of these animals in a land where animals still lurk in the forests. But more than being chance-met animals, many of them become symbolic motifs in the kantha. The elephant became a symbol of material prosperity.

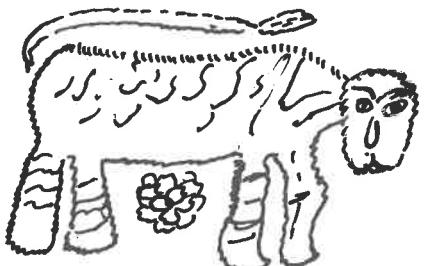
The tiger in the kantha is often part of a hunting scene; thus under the power of the hunter as well as of the woman



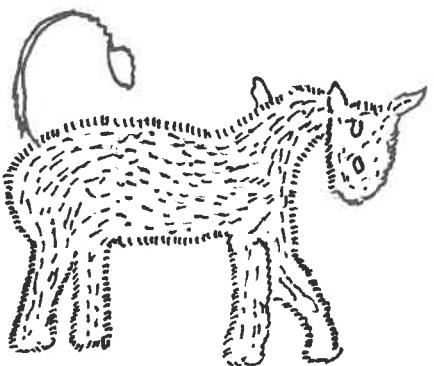
A rath



An elephant



A tiger



A tiger

who embroidered the kantha. How, then, could the tiger represent any danger, even if one did meet it in the forest while collecting firewood or fetching water? It is possible that the playful images of tigers with stripes, spots, and even occasionally heart-shaped dots as in a kantha from the newly acquired Bonovitz Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art owes something to the legend of Gazi Pir, famous for taming riders and riding them.

It is also possible, as Hameeda Hossain suggests, that the same motif may have several meanings—some perhaps that the kantha-maker was not quite aware of. Thus the horse—which would be associated most directly with material wealth—might also be “a mobile force, symbol of the sun,” suggestive of the “coming of the Aryans” or even the “*duldul* from the Moharram story.”<sup>24</sup>

**Bird Motifs.** Various types of birds find a place in the kantha. The most common is, however, the peacock. The peacock, it has been pointed to me by Mohammed Sirajuddin, is not a local bird. Its presence in the kanthas therefore is suggestive of the receptive mind of the kantha-maker, ready to absorb everything. The peacock would, however, suggest the aristocracy who could afford to acquire these North Indian birds. Thus the peacock, like the elephant, would suggest material wealth. At the same time, the peacock in Indian art symbolizes love. In Mughal paintings as well, a lovelorn maiden is depicted with a peacock. While in most kanthas, the peacock is by itself or in the process of eating a snake, in an early 19th century kantha from Faridpur at present in the Bangladesh National Museum, the two women depicted in the kantha are each hugging a peacock.<sup>25</sup>

**Toilet Articles.** Mirrors, combs, earrings, a *surma dani*—a container for antimony used as an eye-liner—figure prominently in large kanthas as well as in *arshilata*. They are articles desired by women for themselves, but they also become symbolic of personal beauty and the marital status.

<sup>24</sup> “Symbolism and Tradition of the Nakshi Kantha,” seminar paper presented at the Folk Art and Crafts Foundation, Sonargaon, February 1983.

<sup>25</sup> According to Dr. Enamul Haque, this was the first kantha the museum acquired. Personal communication.



Bostani with a kalka tree, a fertility motif



Detail of Jessore kantha with tree-of-life motif. Note use of *kaitya* for background embroidery. The pink yarn is wool. Zainul Abedin Collection

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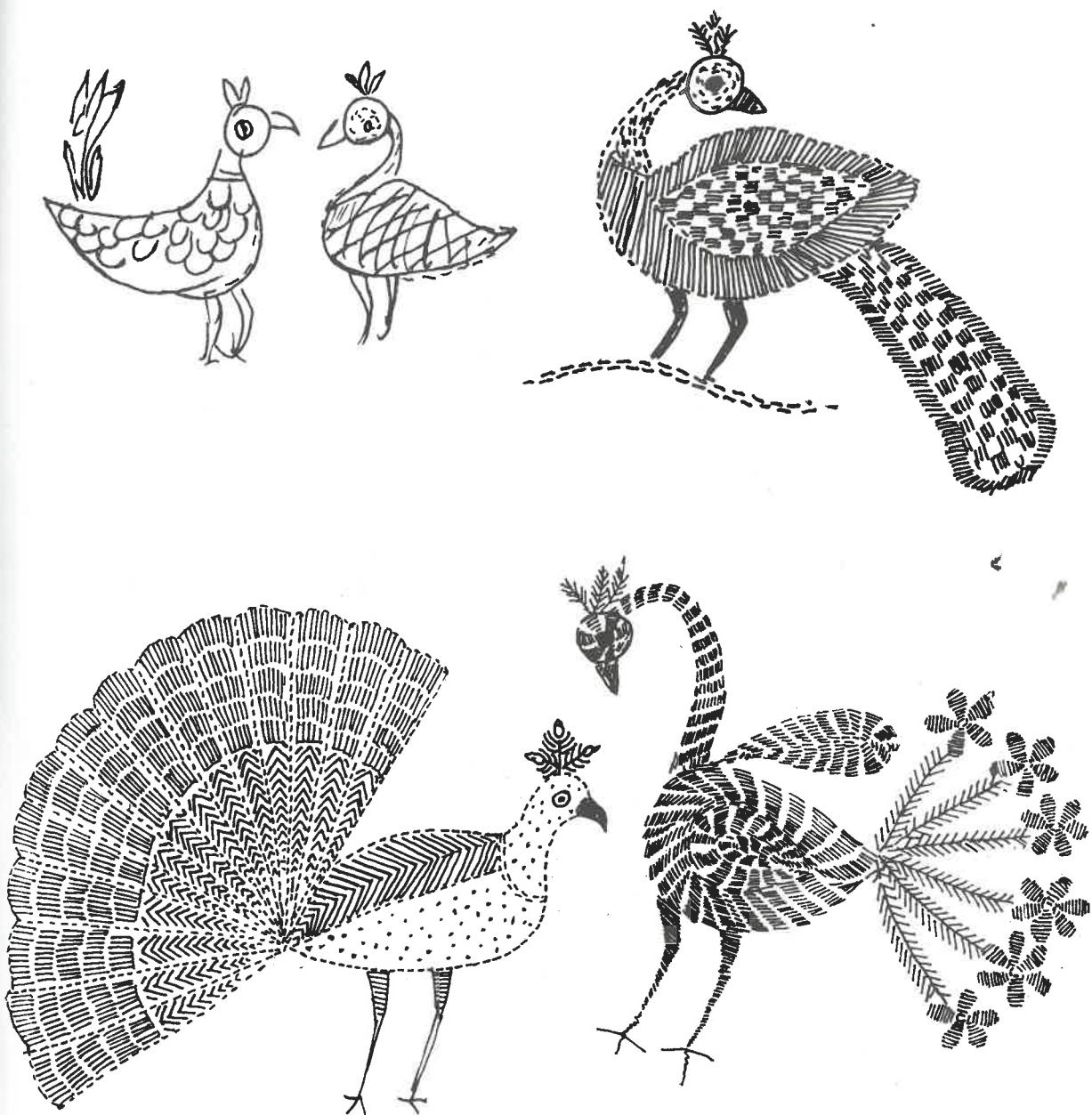


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Detail of Jessore kantha with bicycle, earrings, umbrella, hurricane lantern, football, watch and inscriptions in Bangla and "Hause" in English. Zainul Abedin Collection



Kantha made by Johura Khatoon, circa 1940



A variety of peacock forms

**Kitchen Implements.** The *kula* or the winnowing fan, *beri* or round tongs, to hold *dekchis*, the *bothi* or the curving floor knife, are other kantha motifs. Apart from being common household items, they represent plenty. They are symbolic of brimming cooking pots and plenty of food in the kitchen.<sup>26</sup>

**The Kantha Motif.** The kantha, too, occurs as a motif in kanthas. Occasionally it is a simply embroidered article, but often it is elaborately embroidered with a number of motifs. In this case the embroidered kantha motif becomes a symbol of marriage.

**The Palanquin Motif.** The palanquin is another traditional kantha motif. Not only does it represent the mode of transport of the past, but it is also associated with marriage, the bride being generally carried in it. The palanquin thus also becomes a symbol of marriage.

Apart from these traditional motifs in the kantha, almost all of which tell us about the life of the people and their hopes and fears, there were several other motifs that the kantha-maker embroidered into her kantha. Whatever she saw, she embroidered into it. Some strange designs are, therefore, also to be found. One kantha, for instance, contains the imprint of the Bombay Dyeing Mills embroidered onto the kantha. Embroidering what she saw, the kantha artist embroidered the world around her. And embroidering what she wanted for either herself or for the person for whom she was making the kantha, she described the inner world of the rural Bengali woman.



Detail of *asan* kantha.  
Note upside-down palanquin

<sup>26</sup> When a Hindu bride comes to her husband's home, she is welcomed by numerous rituals. One of these involves a pot of milk full to the brim.

## Kantha Borders

Most kanthas have some form of a border: either a sari border is stitched on, or a border pattern is embroidered around the kantha. Other kanthas have these borders as their main feature, often so closely parallel to each other that there are no spaces between them. In Jessore, Faridpur and Kushtia, border patterns are often used to ornament leaves or stems.

Border patterns have innumerable designs, the weave running borders being the older and more valuable because they are a repertory of sari border designs, some of them no longer worked in saris. As G. S. Dutt notes, "in them we find conserved old traditional patterns of border designs of great variety and loveliness which were undoubtedly used in making saree borders in the older times but the use of many of which in the saree borders has been discontinued by the weavers ...."<sup>1</sup>

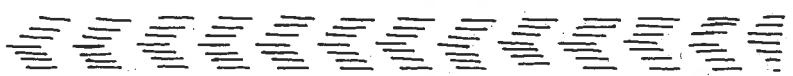
At Faridpur, Jessore, Magura and Kushtia, borders are still worked today in weave running, but elsewhere there is a tendency to employ either the threaded running stitch or a combination of various stitches like the cross stitch, the feather stitch and the arrowhead in simple border patterns.

Many of the patterns are traditional and have definite names, but occasionally traditional names are used for innovations as well. Several of the names come from agriculture or from folk beliefs and superstitions. While most come from nature, a few—because of the receptive mind of the kantha artist—come from the machines that are increasingly becoming a part of life everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> "The Art of Kantha," 460.

From agriculture come the names *dhaner shish* and *khejur chhori*, *motor dana*, *phul par*, *jhop taga*, *anaj taga*. From superstitions and folk beliefs come the names *ta'abiz par* and *chok par*. From water symbolism comes the *beki* or the wave-patterned border. From nature we have *maach taga*. And from the world of machines come the names *wrench taga* and *grafi taga*.

**Pipre Sari or the ant border.** This is a border worked in the *kaitya* stitch. A row of running stitches is taken, not only to act as a guide line for the remaining lines but also to mark the beginning of the border pattern. Each succeeding row of running stitches is taken parallel to this row, but each line moves slightly ahead of the previous one. The appearance of this border pattern is very similar to a row of moving ants—a very familiar sight when the rains start in Bangladesh.



*Dhuner Shish or Khejur Chhori*, the paddy stalk or the date branch

**Dhuner Shish or Khejur Chhori, the paddy stalk or the date branch.** This border pattern is also worked in the *kaitya* stitch. After a row of *pipre sari* has been worked, the row is "bent" to give the impression of a paddy stalk or date branch.

**Bichhe Par or the scorpion border.** This is a variation of the above. Instead of one bend, there are three v-shaped bends, the final effect being similar to a stylized scorpion.

**Beki, the wavy or bent border.** The *kaitya* is worked in wave-like patterns.



*Bichhe Par* or scorpion border



Kantha from Jessore with tree-of-life motif. Apart from cotton yarn, some wool has also been used for the embroidery.  
Zainul Abedin Collection



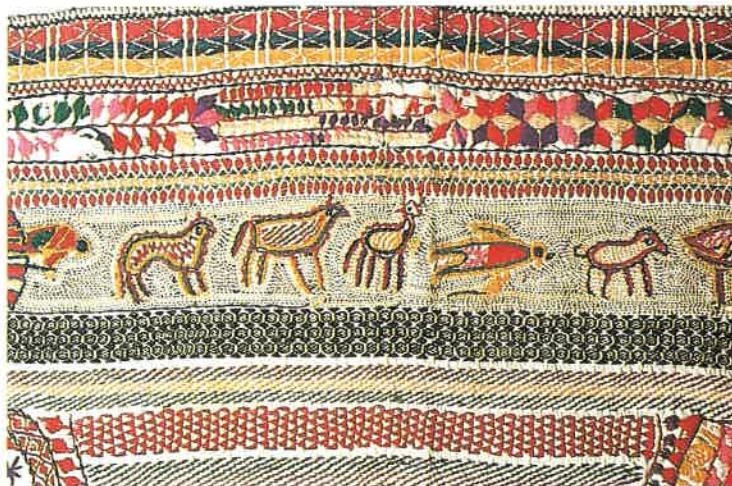
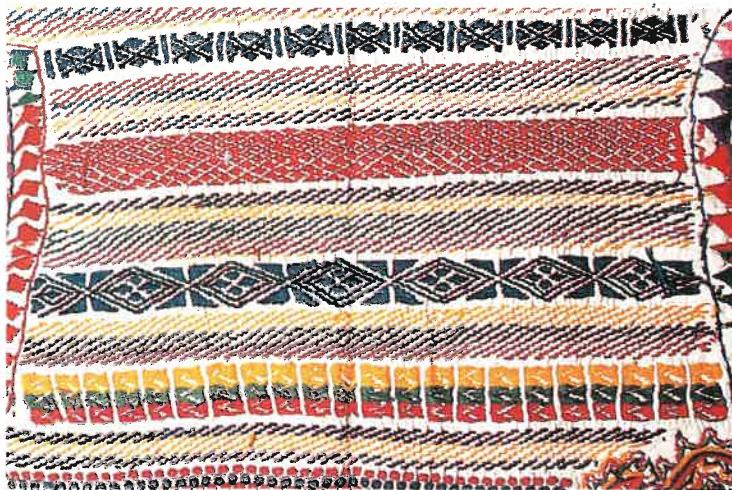
*Par tola sujni* kantha with central lotus. Zainul Abedin Collection

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*Par tola bostani* with trees-of-life. Zainul Abedin Collection

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Detail of *par tola bostani*

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**Motor Dana** or the pea border. This is one of the simplest of borders worked in the *chatai*. The most common is a row of small squares, suggestive of a row of peas. Small circles are also occasionally to be found.

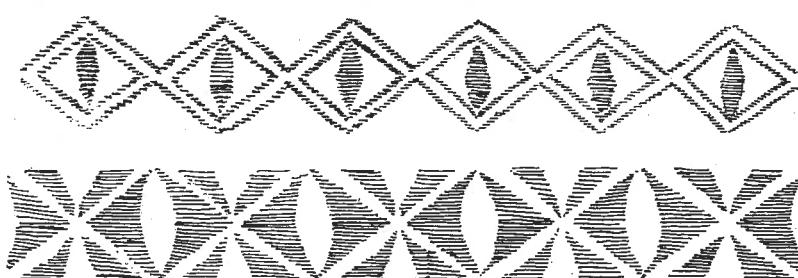
**Barfi** or the diamond border. This border in the weave running stitch comprises of a row of diamond shapes. The pattern has a number of variations, some, because of their distinctive designs, being called by different names.

**The Chok Par** or the eye border. This is really a variation of the *barfi*. The white circle in the centre of the diamond motif, encircling a black circle, creates the strong impression of an eye; hence this name for the border.

**Ta'abiz Par** or the amulet border. This pattern is so-called as it resembles the *ta'abiz* or amulet worn by women in rural areas. It is also to be found in folk jewellery elsewhere



Motor dana, the pea border



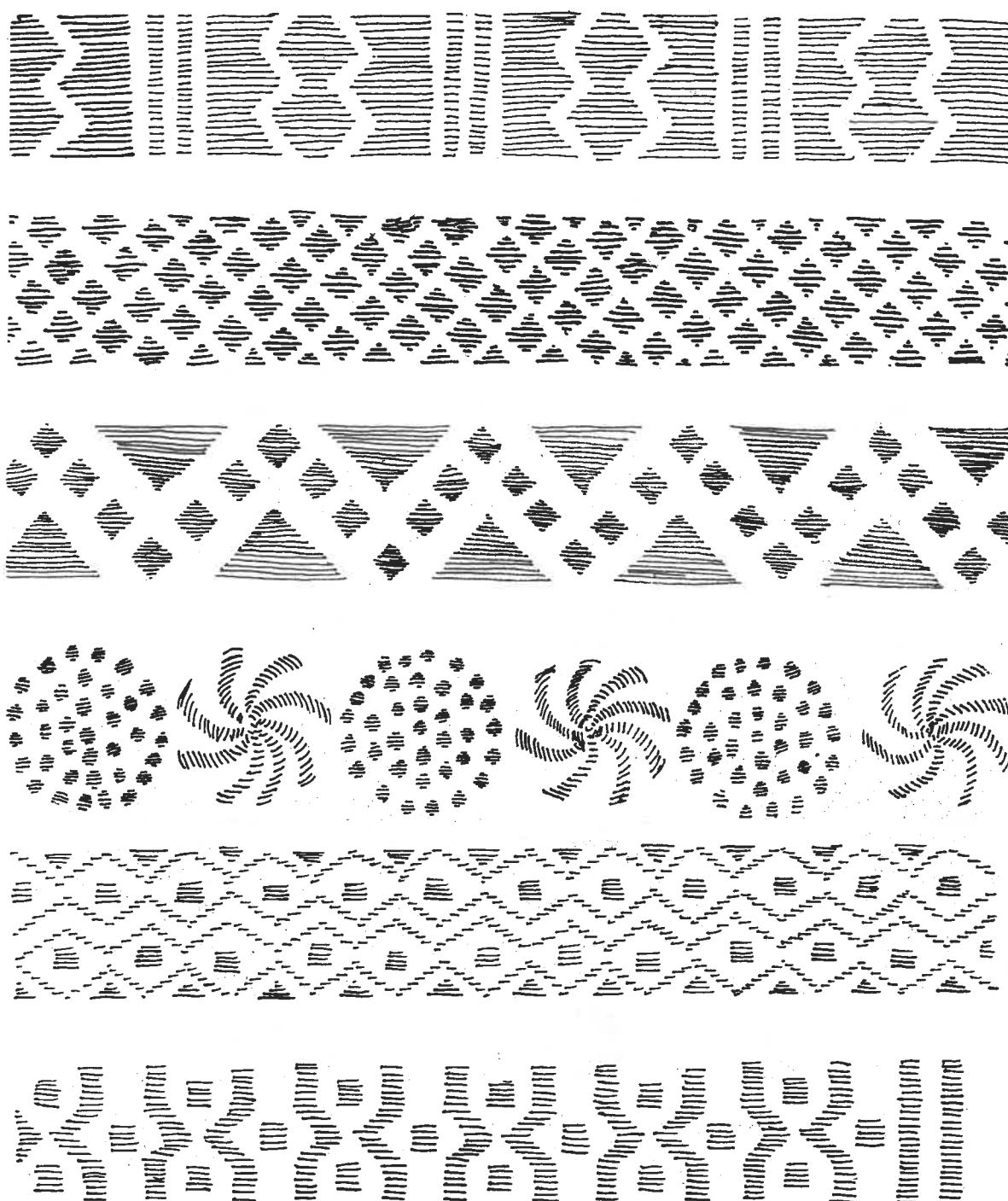
Variation of chok par or the eye border



Beki



Taabiz par, the amulet border



A variety of border patterns

in India. It has been pointed out that it resembles the design on the walls of the palace of Akbar's Turkish queen at Fatehpur Sikri and thus it was perhaps originally a Turkish design.<sup>2</sup>

Intricate as some of these designs are, it must be remembered that none of them are drawn on to the cloth. The first row of running stitches acts as the guiding line for the rest of the border. The sure eye of the needlewoman and her steady hand create these traditional border patterns in the kanthas.

Less elaborately worked borders are often a blending of the traditional running stitch with other stitches. Many of these borders have been given names from objects familiar to the women who have embroidered them. Thus, even when composed of foreign stitches, they have succeeded in blending into the tradition of the kantha.

The *Mala Taga*<sup>3</sup> or the garland border is composed of running stitches and the cross stitch. Two rows of running stitches are taken, the stitches being also parallel to each other. The distance between each stitch and that between the two rows is the same. After these two lines have been completed, cross stitches are taken in the spaces between the stitches.

The *Moi Taga* or the ladder border is a variation of this border. The same type of parallel rows of spaced running stitches is taken. After this, however, a row of cross stitch is worked between the two parallel stitches.

The *Gut Taga* consists of three rows of parallel running stitches. Two cross stitches are worked one on top of each other between two rows of stitches. Leaving the next space blank, the cross stitches are repeated in the space between the next pair of stitches.

The *Chik Taga* or the choker border is a variation of the *gut*. In this version, rows of cross stitches are worked in all the spaces between the stitches.

The *Nolok Taga* or the nose ring border is a combination of three stitches: the running, the cross and the arrowhead.

<sup>2</sup> This piece of information was given to me by Bunny Page, formerly of Aarong.

<sup>3</sup> The names of this delicate-looking border as well as those that follow—many of them in the threaded running stitch—were given to me by kantha-makers at the BRAC centre at Jamalpur, when I visited them in 1979.



Mala taga, the necklace border



Moi taga, the ladder border



Gut taga

A row of running stitches is first taken. Then a row of cross stitches is embroidered between the stitches. The design is completed with a row of arrowheads.

The *Maachh Par* or the fish border is a combination of the running stitch and the herringbone stitch. A row of running stitches is taken. A row of herringbones is then worked. At this stage half a fish is completed. A second row of stitching completes the design.

The *Panch Taga* or *Panch Mala Taga* or the five-thread of five-strand necklace border is one of the simplest forms of the threaded running stitch. Three rows of alternating running stitches are taken. The needle then weaves in and out of the stitches.

The *Bisa Taga* or the scorpion border is a variation of the *Panch Taga* border. Two rows of closely spaced running stitches are taken on both sides of the *panch taga* to complete this border pattern.

The *Anaj Taga* or the vegetable border is also made up of three rows of alternating running stitches, but the needle takes up different stitches as it weaves in and out of the rows. A pattern similar to a row of beans is the result.

The *Shamuk Taga* or the snail border is also called the *Sagar Taga*, as it resembles curving waves. Four rows of alternating running stitches are taken as the basis for this border. Interestingly enough, versions of this border occur over distant times. It is to be found not only in the kanthas, but also on Peruvian pottery.

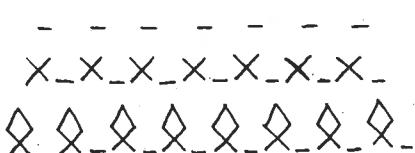
The *Chok Taga* or the eye border is also worked in the threaded running stitch. Three rows of parallel running stitches form the basis for this border. A stitch in the centre of each diamond serves as the pupil of the *chok* or eye.

The *Rens Taga* or wrench border is worked on a number of rows of alternating running stitches. Though one does not think of the wrench as a motif for embroidery, the kantha-maker does not think it incongruous.

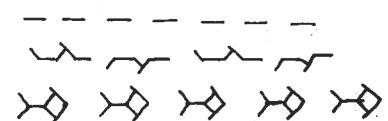
The receptive mind of the kantha artist is revealed in two other borders: the *grafi* or anchor and the *kalam* or pen. In addition to these borders there are numerous other borders without names. Hameeda Hossain and Tofail Ahmed have



Chik taga



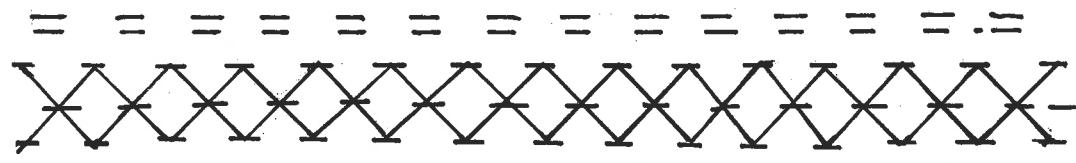
Nolok taga, the nose-ring border



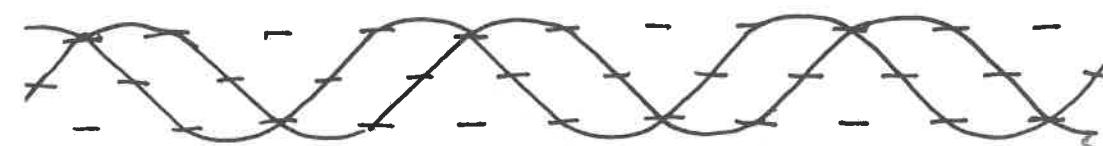
Maachh par, the fish border



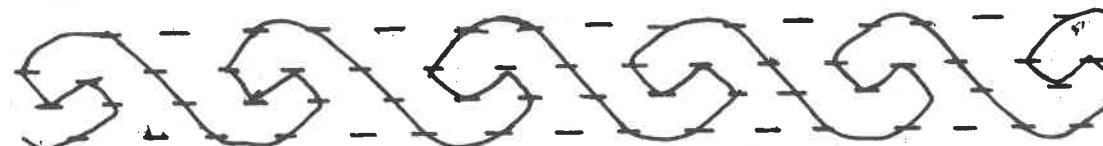
Panch taga



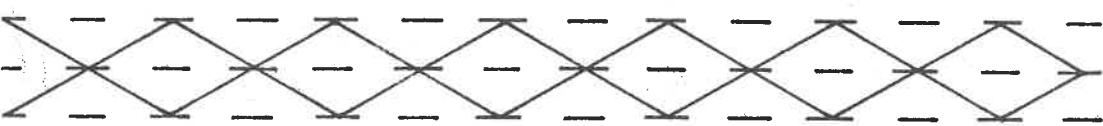
Bisa taga



Anaj taga



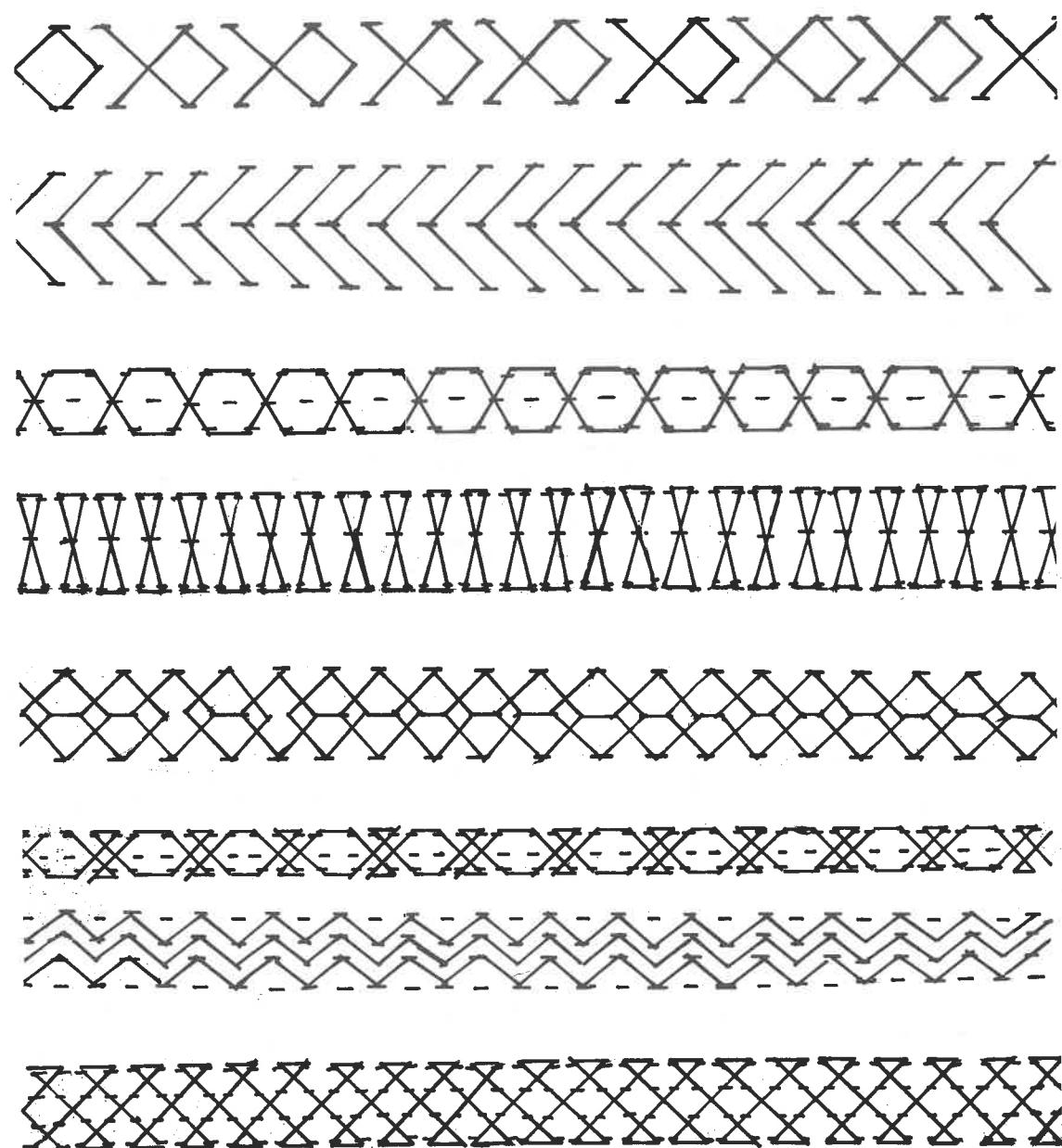
Shamuk taga



Chok taga



Rens taga, the wrench border

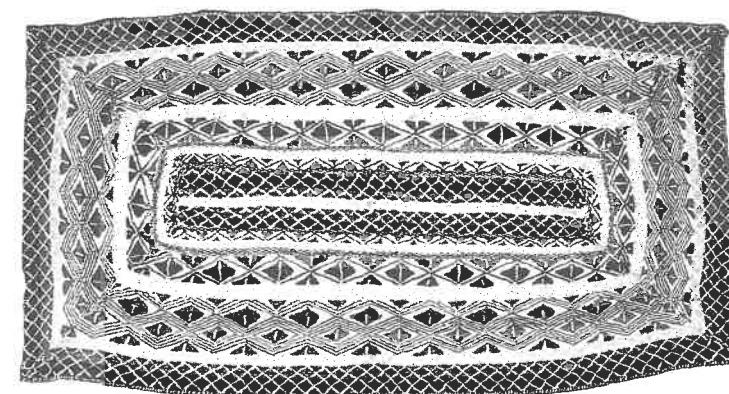


Miscellaneous border patterns

documented a hundred border patterns.<sup>4</sup> Ahmed preferred these ingenious border patterns to motifs.<sup>5</sup>

The intricate nature of some of these border patterns suggests a close intimacy of the kantha-maker with a variety of weaving patterns. It is perhaps not surprising that the most exquisite of kanthas using sari border patterns are to be found in areas associated with the weaving of fine saris. In the late nineteenth century, N. N. Banerjee noted that fine saris were woven at Satkhira, Hooghly, Bankura, Nadia, Pabna, Dhaka.<sup>6</sup> G. N. Gupta mentioned the production of high-class saris in Kishoreganj and Tangail.<sup>7</sup> G. S. Dutt noted how *par tola* kanthas, or what he referred to as "textile pattern kanthas," were made by women of the weaver class, particularly in the district of Jessore.<sup>8</sup>

While the most common use of these *par* patterns is to embroider borders, old kanthas also used these patterns ingeniously to embroider motifs. Using simple as well as intricate weaving techniques, the kantha artists embroidered designs into floral or leaf motifs. And occasionally, as Manada Sundari did, could even use *par* patterns to embroider

Small *par tola* kantha

<sup>4</sup> Tofail Ahmed, Hameeda Hossain and Mohammad Sayeedur. "Survey of Folk Crafts and Documentation of Designs in Bangladesh: A Narrative Report." Dhaka, 1988. Mimeo.

<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication.

<sup>6</sup> *Monograph on the Cotton Fabrics of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1889).

<sup>7</sup> *The Industries and Resources of Eastern Bengal and Assam for 1907-1908* (Shillong, 1908).

<sup>8</sup> "The Art of Kantha," 460.

varying designs in the garments worn by the human figures represented in their kanthas.

Mohammad Sayeedur suggested that *par* patterns were closely linked to the Chakma *alam* or sampler and perhaps borrowed from it. However, it is unlikely that indigenous weavers from the Chakma or Tanchangya communities would live in close proximity with women of the kantha-making, sari-weaving and -wearing areas. Moreover, the *alam* was till recently jealously preserved from the eyes of the outsider. A Chakma weaver today is more likely to incorporate a sari border pattern that she finds attractive into her weaving than would be true of a weaver doing the opposite. It is likelier that similarities between *par* patterns and *alam* designs were coincidental rather than deliberate.

## Different Types of Kanthas

Embroidered kanthas vary in style according to the material used, the stitch employed and the total design or lay-out of the kantha. According to the stitch employed, kanthas may be divided into four types: the running stitch kantha, the *lohorī*, the *lik*, and the cross stitch kantha.

The running stitch kantha is the truly indigenous kantha. Originally always composed of old cloth, it is now-a-days often made with new cloth, usually cotton but also occasionally silk. Borders and motifs are embroidered by means of numerous variations in the running stitch itself, but a number of other embroidery stitches may also be used.

The running stitch kantha may be of two types: *Nakshi* or figured and *par tola* or patterned. Figured kanthas may again vary between motif kanthas and pictorial ones. In motif kanthas the interest lies in the motifs which appear to be scattered randomly all over the kantha. There, however, does tend to be a pattern in many such kanthas, with a central lotus and trees-of-life in the four corners. In some motif kanthas, the kantha is divided into panels and the panels then filled with motifs. Pictorial kanthas depict entire scenes: wedding processions, a dance of *gopis*, women with peacocks, hunting scenes, gentlemen of leisure, boat journeys. Hindu legends find a prominent place in kanthas from Jessore and Faridpur. Different episodes in the story of Radha and Krishna, for example, including the *bastraharan* or clothes stealing scene, find a prominent place in a Faridpur *asan* kantha in a private collection. A kantha in the Stella Kramrisch Collection,

which also depicts several episodes in the story of Radha and Krishna, includes the scene of Krishna's birth and the *nauka bilash*. The focal point of the scenes is often the central *mandala*. In some kanthas, the entire field of the quilt is divided into sections, each section containing a separate scene.

The *par tola* or *sarir par* kantha is a patterned kantha which features designs similar to patterns of sari borders. It ranges from the simple to the elaborate. *Par* or border designs are worked in a variety of stitches. Older kanthas are usually worked with the weave, running stitch, the *kaitya* and the *chatai*, the newer ones with the threaded running stitch and composite stitches comprising two or three different types of stitches.

The simplest type of the *par tola* kantha has a *par* pattern around the edges and a white field in white kantha stitch. A slightly more elaborate type of *par tola* kantha has some additional *par* patterns covering the field of the kantha. These *par* patterns either run vertically down the length of the kantha or are worked parallel to the outer borders. Other variations have an outer border with an inner border parallel to it. The inner field of the kantha is then demarcated with *par* patterns into diamonds. Occasionally a kantha with an outside border will have four corner motifs, with the rest of the kantha quilted in white kantha stitches. Some of these kanthas have an interplay of a pattern of diamonds and triangles. In an even more elaborate version of a *par tola* kantha, concentric border patterns are embroidered around a central lotus motif. *Par* patterns or trees-of-life come from the corners to meet at the central motif. Sometimes a few motifs are scattered in the panels, but, with the prominence of the *par* patterns, the interest in the motifs is secondary.

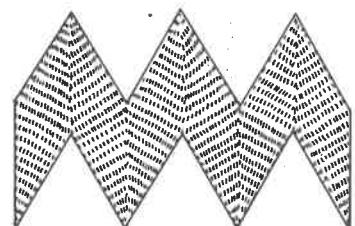
Some of the finest *par tola* kanthas are covered with concentric *par* patterns around a central lotus motif. There is no gap between one *par* pattern and the next, the whole kantha giving the appearance of a woven piece of cloth rather than a stitched one.

The *lohoi* kantha is another traditional kantha, and associated with the Rajshahi area. According to Mohammad Sayeedur, the *lohoi* might even be the oldest type of kantha. The name of this kantha is derived from the Urdu word "lehr," after the wave pattern popular in these kanthas. It should, however, be noted that this wave pattern is not the only pattern to be embroidered in this type of kantha, the *kautar khupi* or triangle, the diamond and even straight lines being popular.

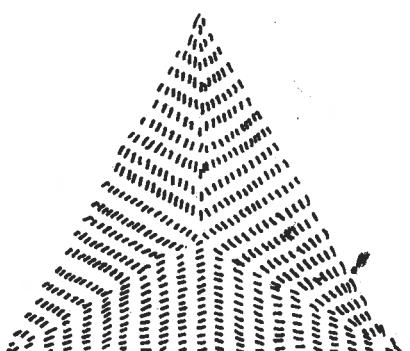
The *lohoi* kantha is made of *kapa*—the two pieces of rather coarse white cloth which used to be worn by women of the Rajshahi region, one wrapped sarong fashion, the other draped over the top. The *kapa* has borders in red, black or blue. Often a *lohoi* kantha has a strip of this coloured border running down its length, testifying to the material which has gone into its making. Made from a number of *kapas* stitched together, the *lohoi* is thicker than the kanthas of Jessore or Faridpur made from saris. Today, the *lohoi* is rarely made as the work is painstakingly slow and stitching through the thick fabric difficult.

The *lohoi* required a large amount of yarn; hence the thread used for these kanthas was not thread pulled from the edge of sari borders but yarn twisted with the help of a *taika*. Closely parallel running stitches were taken with this yarn. Unlike the Jessore kanthas—where the kantha *phor* produces a rippled texture—the effect of these closely parallel stitches in the *lohoi* kanthas is that of regimented ridges. Where coloured thread has been used, the effect is of coloured ridges of yarn, interspersed with white ridges of material. The effect of the stitching is similar to that of weaving, and the patterns appear to have been woven into the kantha rather than embroidered onto it.

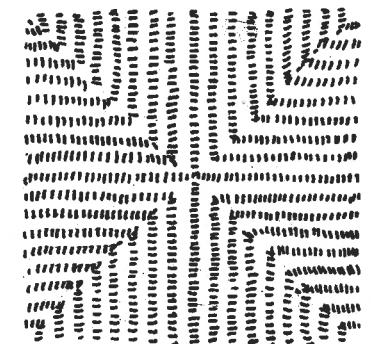
*Loheri* kanthas have neither a profusion of motifs nor of colours. The designs of these kanthas are geometrical and limited to angles and lines. A single pattern is repeated throughout the kantha. Limited colours are used, generally red, blue, black and white. There is a tri-colour effect in these kanthas with the use of red, white and either blue or black yarn. Occasionally the black or blue thread runs out, and the kantha-maker continues with whichever colour is available.



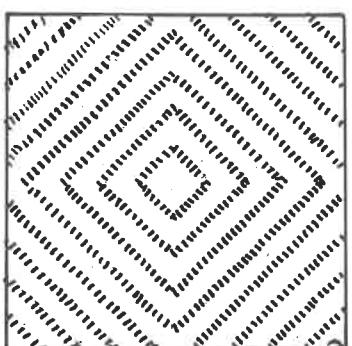
Lohori motif



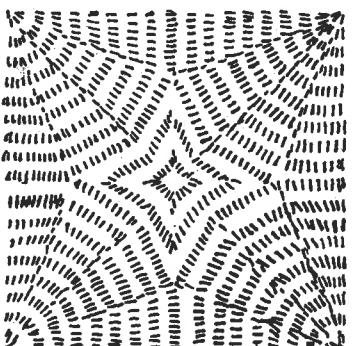
Kautar khupi



Charchala



Aatchala



Barochala

The *shoja*—straight or simple kantha—is the simplest of *lohorī kanthas*. Vertical lines are worked into the kantha to produce a pattern of stripes. Tofail Ahmed referred to the *shoja* kantha as a distinct type of Rajshahi kantha known as the *chhop tana*.<sup>1</sup> However, this kantha uses the same stitch as the more popular *lohorī*, and may be considered as a variation of the *lohorī* rather than a separate type.

The *lohorī* or wave motif may be used to cover the entire kantha. Occasionally the lines are broken by vertical lines as found in the *shoja* kantha. Among the other variations of the *lohorī* are the *kautar khupi*, the *charchala*, the *aatchala*, the *barochala*.

The *kautar khupi*—meaning pigeon coop—or triangle—and the *barfi* or diamond motif are other popular motifs of this type of kantha. The diamond is stitched in different ways, the manner of stitching resulting in subtle variations. These variations are known by particular names, depending on the number of triangular patterns visible in one diamond. Thus we have the *charchala*, the *aatchala* and the *barochala*, depending on whether there are 4, 8 or 12 triangles visible.

Apart from these geometrical patterns, there is one other motif to be found in the *lohorī* kantha—the heart-shaped betel leaf. This motif is generally worked in green yarn, the manner of stitching producing a pattern of white veins where the material of the kantha shows through.

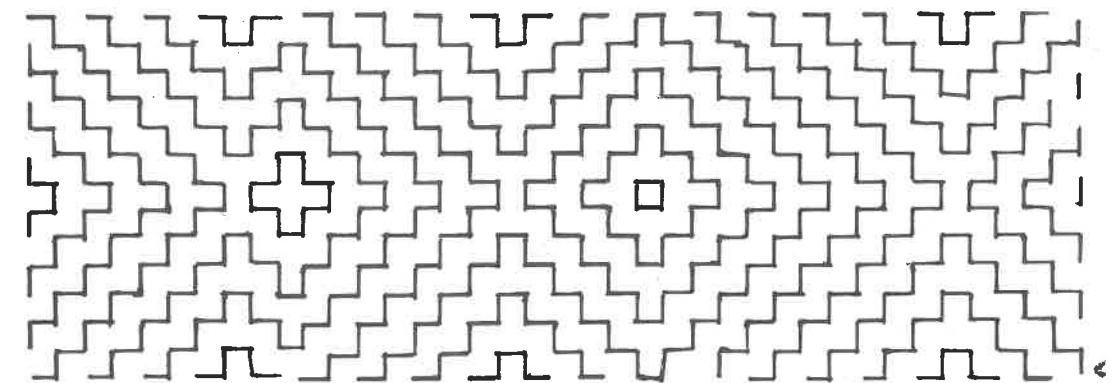
A third type of quilt is the *lik* or *anarasi* kantha. At Chapai Nawabganj red *salu* is used for the upper layer, but old cloth for the remaining layers. At Jessore, where the stitch is also popular, old white material is used rather than red *salu*. Coloured yarn is used for the embroidery. Fewer layers of cloth are used at Jessore; therefore, the Jessore kantha is softer than the Rajshahi *lik* kantha.

The simplest of *lik* patterns is that of steps. A more attractive pattern is that of the *lik phul*. In this pattern a number of rows of stitches are taken, the stitch in each row alternating with those of the previous row. Then a row of stitches parallels the pattern of stitches in the previous row. The same number of rows are then worked as the preceding

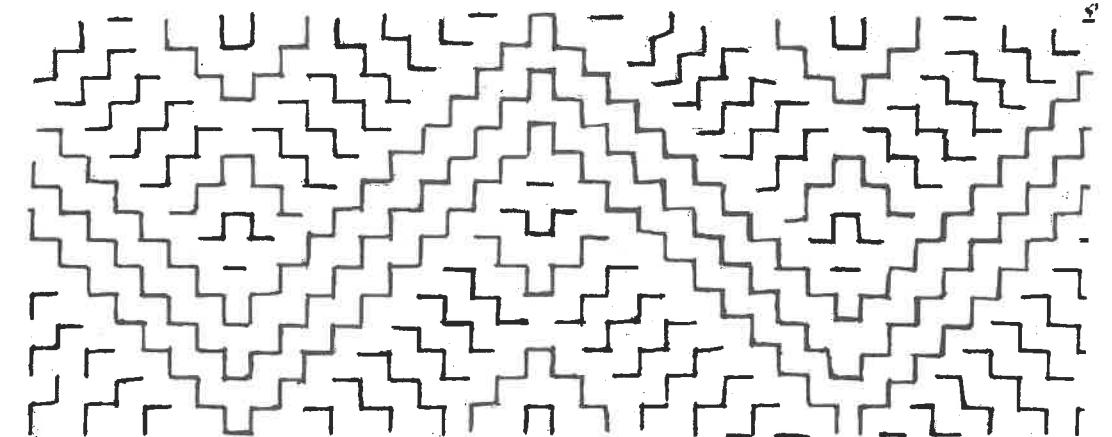
<sup>1</sup> Personal communication.

parallel rows. After this the kantha is turned, and the rows of stitches joined by lines of parallel stitches, creating attractive patterns.

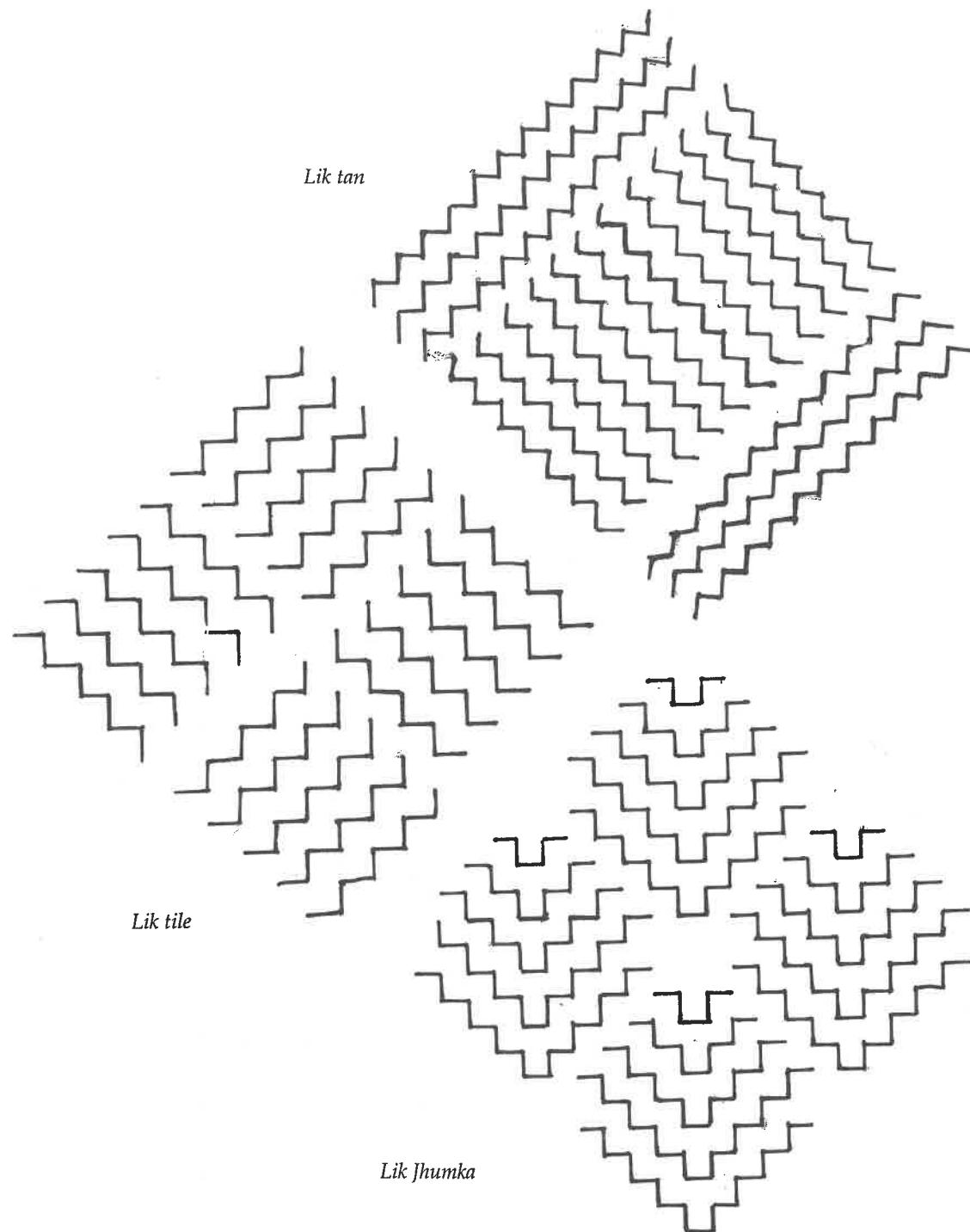
There are a number of variations of this pattern, each variation having a different name. The names of some common *lik* patterns at Chapai Nawabganj are *lik tan*, *lik*



Lik phul or anarasi



Lik lohori

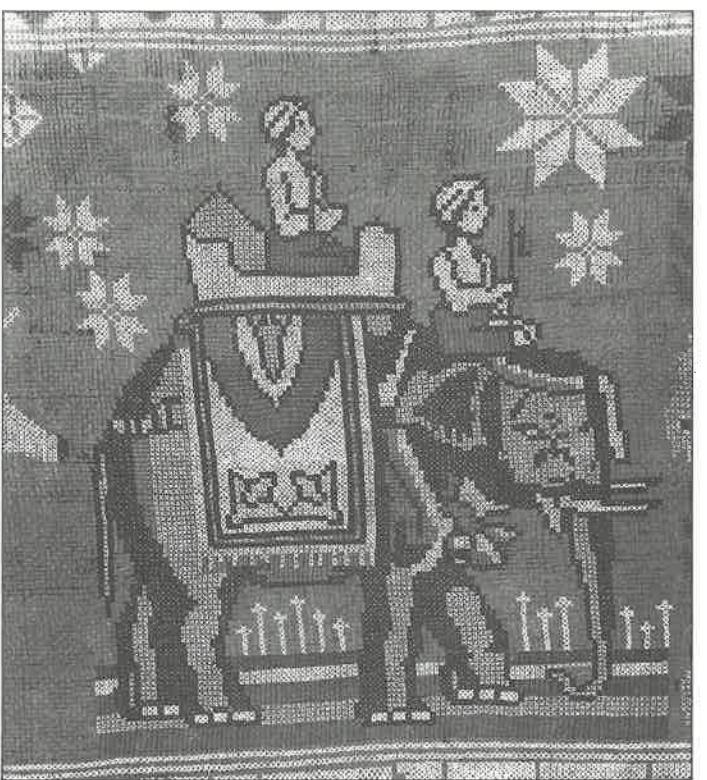


tile, lik jhumka, lik lohori.<sup>2</sup> Lik patterns are embroidered all over the kantha.

The "carpet" or cross stitch kantha was the most popular of commercial kanthas until the kantha revival of the eighties. Most cross stitch kanthas are worked on red *salu*, like the *sujnis*. The other layers, however, are composed of old cloth. Some cross stitch kanthas are also found made of white material, but these are much fewer. The origin of the "carpet" kanthas should not be difficult to discover. The stitch is so obviously a foreign stitch that some Englishwoman—the wife of a District Magistrate perhaps—must have helped to create it. From my talks with the women of the Chapai Nawabganj Mahila Sangstha all I was able to learn was that this type of kantha had been introduced by foreigners. Mrs. Marjina Haq told me that her grandfather had cross stitch pictures embroidered on *do-sooti* material and framed on the wall, in imitation of such pictures hanging on the walls of English drawing rooms. A brief analysis of the term "carpet" used for this kantha might also help suggest its origin. I was told by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh of Kaliganj Babupara that Hindus would stitch *galichas* in jute with threads drawn from sari borders. The needle used was thick. The thick needle used for such embroidery—and for stitching woollen garments—is known as the "carpet" needle. It is therefore possible that the carpet kantha originated from a hybridization of these cross stitch embroideries and the *sujni*.

The indigenization of the cross stitch and its being employed for kantha work resulted in a substitution of local motifs for foreign ones. Usually, the motifs to be seen in the carpet kantha are a delocalized "Indian" type rather than truly Bengali ones. Very popular, for example, are elephants and their *mahouts*, deer and peacocks, in addition to stylized flowers. The Bangladesh National Museum possesses a fine "carpet" kantha on white material embroidered with delicate cross stitches. The kantha, one of the few to be signed, depicts the goddess Saraswati seated on a swan. On the left is an inscription in Bangla

<sup>2</sup> These names were given to me by the late Mrs. Efratunnessa of Chapai Nawabganj when she kindly hosted me in July 1979.



Detail of cross stitch kantha

which translates as “Gaya, Kashi, Brindaban are nothing. A woman’s existence is at her husband’s feet” and is followed by the date according to the Bangla calendar, 1359—corresponding to 1952/1953—and the name, Parul.

After the kantha revival in the mid-eighties, the carpet kantha has become less popular, with most people who can afford it choosing the traditional kantha over this one. Nevertheless, the carpet kantha is much cheaper than the traditional kantha, and its bright colours make it attractive to local tastes. Hence its popularity continues.

The *sujni*<sup>3</sup> is another distinct type of quilt. While it is different from the kantha, the cross stitch kantha and the *lik*

<sup>3</sup> The term “suzani,” meaning “of needles” or “embroidered,” is still used for the decorative tribal textiles made in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian countries.

Bostani with *satadal* or hundred-petaled lotus. Zainul Abedin Collection



Small kantha depicting Durga triumphant over Mahishashur and flanked by her children. The inscription on the left translates: "The world is ephemeral. Look, the body is ephemeral. Water does not stay on a lotus leaf. Take the name of Hari[god], take the name of Hari in Hari's name. The reality is that the world is ephemeral." The perpendicular line gives the name of the owner: "The owner of this kantha is Sri Hiralal B[andopadhyay?]. Philadelphia Museum of Art

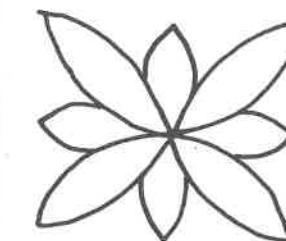


Bostani with a rath and a mosque on two sides of the central lotus.  
Mohammad Sayeedur Collection, courtesy of Muktijuddha Jadughar



The Hunt: SDUW wall-hanging

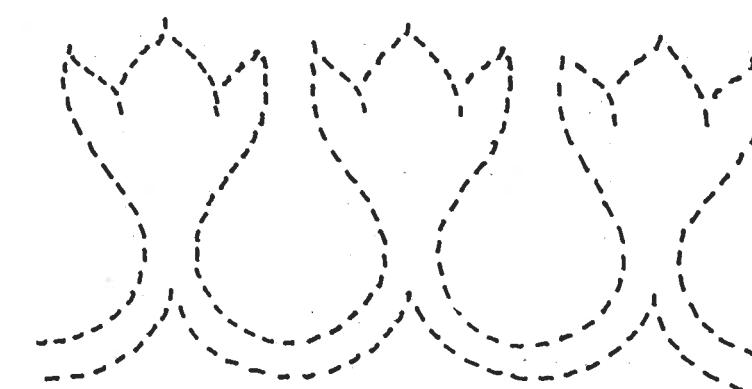
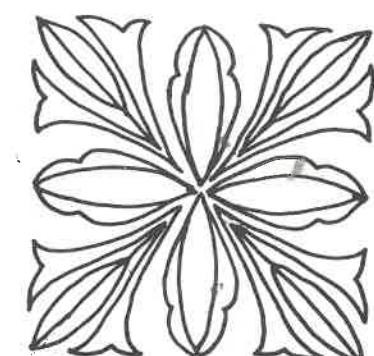
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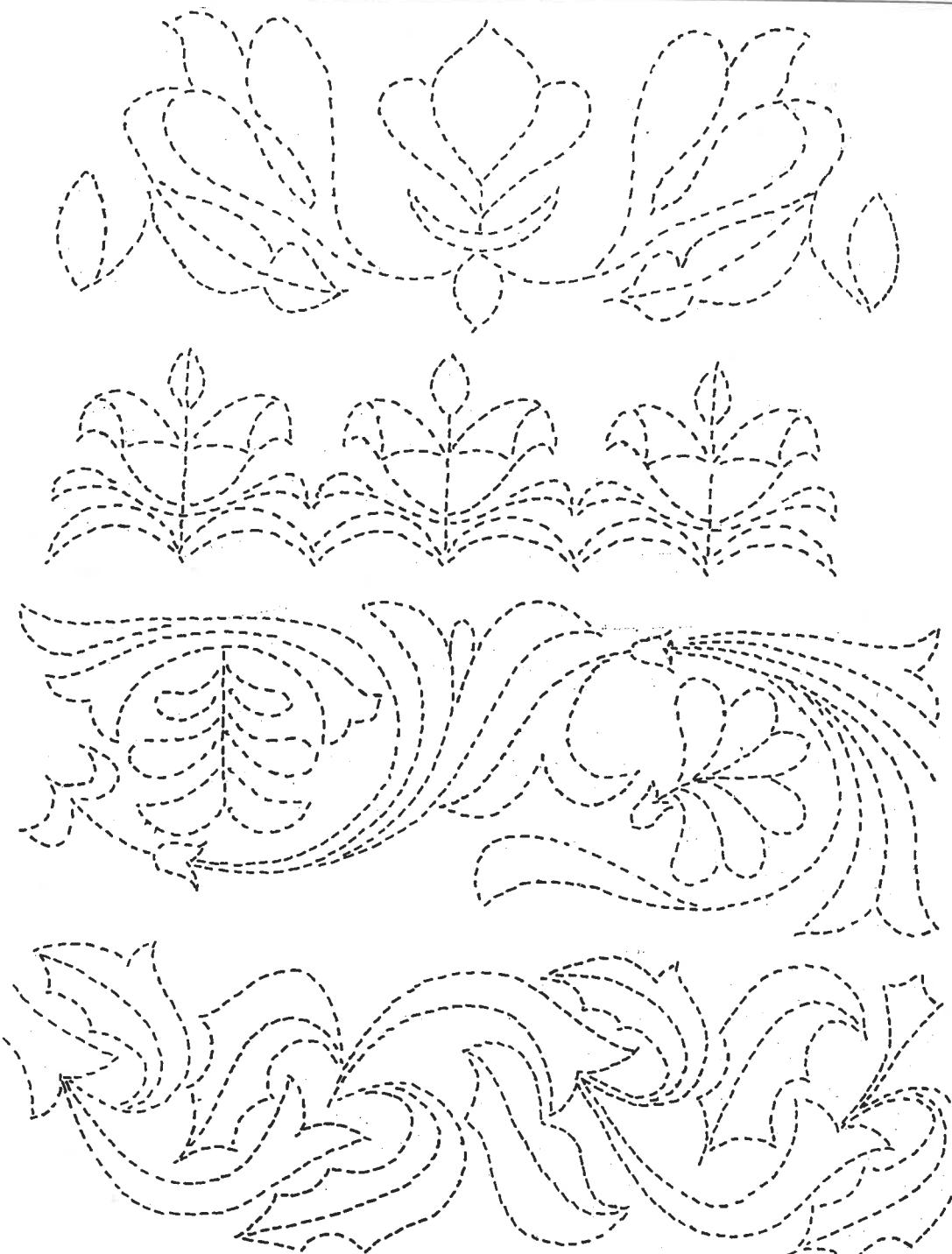
Motifs for central panel

perhaps originated from the *sujni*. Hence it might be well to consider it here. Manadasundari uses the term as a synonym for kantha. The term *sujni* is also used for quilts from Bihar, but the Rajshahi *sujni*—with which this term is exclusively associated in Bangladesh—is different from that of Bihar, which is really a version of the kantha.

The word “*sujni*,” unlike the word “kantha,” has associations with embroidery, being derived from the Persian term *suzan*, referring to needle. Perhaps the etymology explains why the Rajshahi *sujni* motifs usually consist of undulating floral and vine forms, reminiscent of these forms in Persian art. No animal or human forms are depicted in the *sujni*, nor the domestic implements or harvest tools recurrent in other kanthas. Some of the designs appear to be the influence



Panchamul motif for *sujni*



Miscellaneous border patterns from Rajshahi sujnis

of the British presence here. The village women at Raja Rampur referred to the *sujni* as *belayeti sujni*, English quilt. It is quite possible that the *sujni* was also influenced by Indo-Portuguese quilts.<sup>4</sup>

While the kantha is made from old cloth, the surface material of the *sujni* is always new red *salu*. The remaining layers of cloth might be old, but occasionally, especially for a marriage *sujni*, the bottom layer is new white *addhi*. A thick padding of cotton is used instead of old filler cloth.

The stitch used to embroider the *sujni* is a very fine back stitch—the stitch used for some Indo-Portuguese quilts, suggesting its Indo-Portuguese links. The stitches are so fine that they appear to have been made by machine. The thread is almost always new white yarn which has been twisted with the help of a *taika*. Occasionally, however, one might come across a few portions of embroidery worked with a different thread, this being occasioned by the lack of white thread or, as generally happens today, because of the influence of the carpet kantha.

In the kantha, the needlewoman traditionally used her needle to draw the outlines of the motifs before filling them in. In the *sujni*, however, the designs were always stamped onto the quilt using carved wooden blocks, similar to those used in printing cloth. In every kantha, while there is a similarity of design because of the traditional ways in which kanthas were made, there is always something a little different between one kantha and the next. In the *sujni*, however, there tends to be a similarity of design. A popular design would be handed round the *para* or neighbourhood, and there would be a sameness not only in the *sujni* itself—where the same design is repeated—but also in *sujnis* made in different houses in the *para* where almost every family would be related.

Every *sujni* repeats a certain pattern. There is a central panel called a *zamin* or field round which are a number of border panels called the *kanha*. These panels are separated by two straight lines. In some *sujnis* there is a central lotus

<sup>4</sup> Though the chain stitch was often used, the quilt portrayed on the cover of *Embroidered Quilts from the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga Lisboa* (London, 1978) resembles the Rajshahi *sujni*.

motif within the *zamin* as well as corner motifs in the corners of the central panel. Apart from floral forms and leaves, geometrical forms are also popular. The commonest of these are interlacing circles forming a stylized floral motif. Local names for some motifs are *gachh* and *panchomul*. Now-a-days the *sujni* borders are being increasingly used on saris embroidered in kantha stitch. Thus there is a blending of both types.

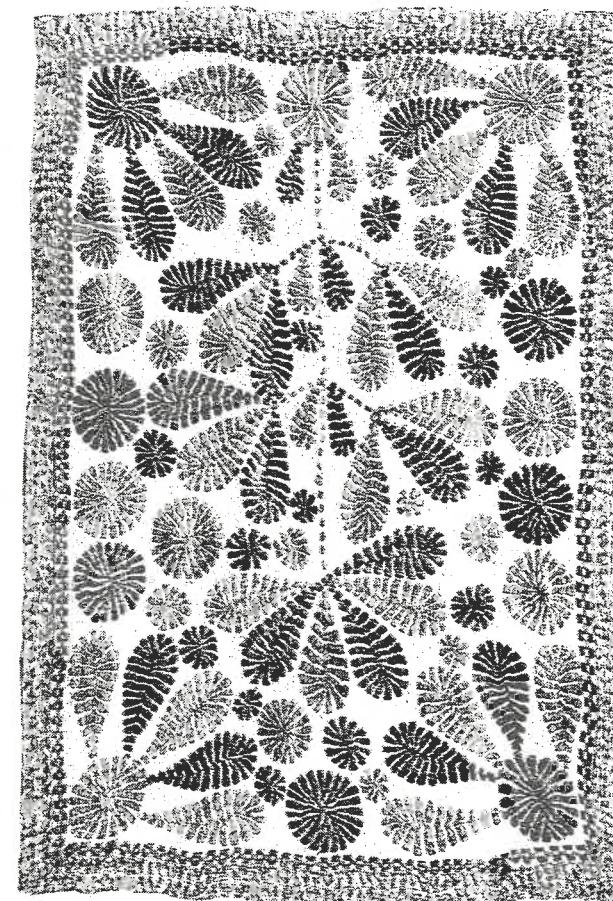
With the kantha revival, the traditional running stitch kantha has come back into fashion, quite displacing the cross stitch kantha. However, certain changes have taken place in the stitchcraft, with the traditional kantha stitch undergoing a change. Kumudini, which was instrumental in bringing back the kantha, perhaps began this process of change as well.

When Sonargaon Hotel commissioned Kumudini for kanthas, Kumudini started training women in kantha work. This training involved the teaching of two distinct stitches: the kantha stitch and a filling stitch which was referred to as *Kashmiri bhorat* by kantha makers at Kumudini, but is more accurately the Romanian stitch. In addition, women were also taught how to embroider *par* patterns in the weave-running stitch. The *bhorat*—perhaps because of the ease and speed with which large areas of the surface can be covered—has become so popular that it is used in some quilts rather than the kantha stitch. In order to distinguish between embroidery using the running kantha stitch and embroidery using the *bhorat*, the terms *nakshi* and “tapestry” are employed. The pieces popularized by Skill Department for Underprivileged Women tended to be tapestry rather than kanthas proper. Surayia Rahman, who initially worked at SDUW, continued this style at Arshi. She subsequently trained many needlewomen from St. Paul’s Sewing Centre, Shelabunia, Khulna. The work of Arshi continues at the organization run by the Salesian Sisters.<sup>5</sup> At Kumudini, as well, much of the work done for spectacle cases, for example, is tapestry rather than kantha.

<sup>5</sup> The Salesian Sisters produce very fine embroidery using the long and short stitch. When they took over Arshi from Surayia Rahman, they called work done following Surayia Rahman’s patterns and embroidery stitches “Arshi-Salesian.”

However, the *bhorat* is used for large areas of kanthas as well. When the kantha stitch is used in addition to the *bhorat* stitch, the work is still called kantha.

Aarong, which had seemed to content itself with repeating old designs, shook off this lethargy and for its thirtieth anniversary planned a *nakshi kantha* exhibition in July 2008. Not content with the threaded running stitch border designs popularized by the Jamalpur Ayesha Abed Centre, Aarong’s host of designers replicated old pieces as well as delved through them to design new and attractive articles for the contemporary market.



Small kantha from Natore with motifs and *par* in *chatai*\*

## Regional Differences in Kanthas

Wherever there are saris, there are kanthas. Thus kanthas are made almost all over Bangladesh. However, embroidered kanthas are mainly associated with the area west of the Meghna. The area east of the Meghna is traditionally associated with woven, rather than embroidered, quilts. At Sylhet the Manipuri weave quilts known as *lasingphi* or *kashmira*<sup>1</sup> and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts narrow strips of woven cloth are sewn down the middle for wrappers. Among the Chakma these wrappers are known as *borgi*, while the Mro call them *wonma*.<sup>2</sup> It is true that Dinesh Chandra Sen described Sylhet as a kantha-making area. Similarly, Jasim Uddin also mentioned Sylhet as a kantha-making area. In fact, the kantha that inspired Jasim Uddin to write *Nakshi Kantha Maath* was from Sylhet. Jasim Uddin himself, however, had not seen this kantha. He had only heard that Abindranath had seen a kantha from Sylhet district which a woman had begun after her marriage and had continued to embroider, putting into it all the incidents of her life. "Shilpacharya Abindranath Sylhet jelaye ekkhana kantha sandhan peyechhilen. Tate ekti meye biye hote arambha kore tar sara jibamer ghatana kantha upar bunat korechhilen."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The former term was provided by Manipuri Metei and the latter by Vishnupriya Manipuris when I was doing a survey of Manipuri weaving in Komolganj, Sylhet in March 2009. See Manjulika Chakma and Niaz Zaman, *Strong Backs Magic Fingers* (Dhaka, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account see Manjulika Chakma and Niaz Zaman, *Strong Backs Magic Fingers*.

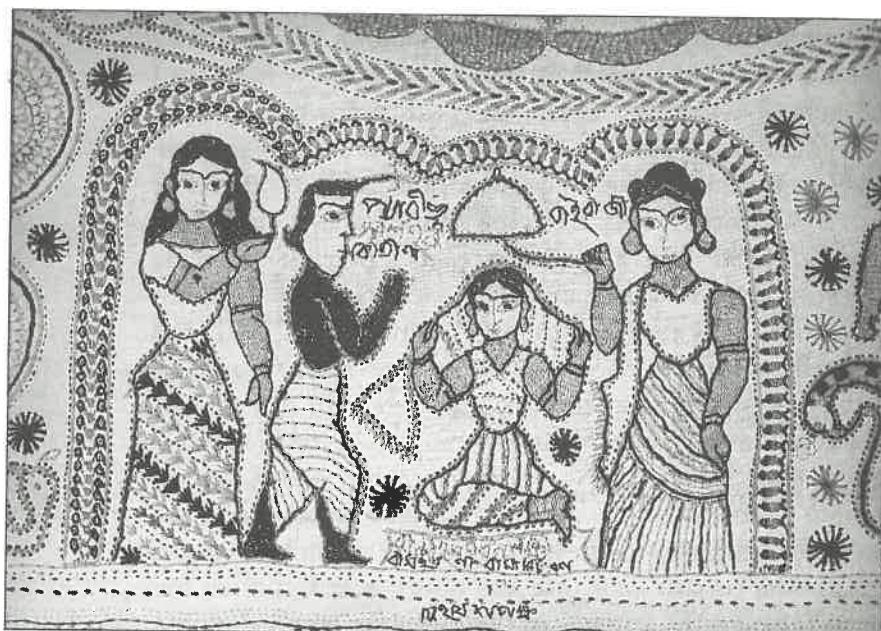
<sup>3</sup> "Purbabanger Nakshi Kantha O Sari," in *Bangladesh Lok Oitija*, ed. Shamsuzzaman Khan (Dhaka, 1985), 270.

No kanthas from Sylhet, however, are to be seen in museums. Most people who mention Sylhet as a kantha-making area seem to do so following Sen and Jasim Uddin.

The popularity of the kantha and its income-generating possibilities are blurring the differences between kantha-making regions. They are also blurring the regional differences between kanthas. Nevertheless, we may still talk about a kantha-making region and a non-kantha-making region. The kantha-making region may again be divided into three distinct areas—though with increasing popularity and production, the same type of kantha is now being produced in kantha-making centres in Jessore, Kushtia, Kapasia, Jamalpur, Chilmari. Nevertheless, it may be pertinent to note the distinct types, particularly as they still do exist. These types may be divided into Rajshahi, Jessore and Mymensingh, corresponding to the areas with which they are associated. Tofail Ahmed suggests that there are two main types: Rajshahi and Jessore.<sup>4</sup> I would, however, suggest that there are three main types, particularly as despite its similarity with the Jessore kantha, the Mymensingh kantha has certain differences which justify its being classified separately.

*Rajshahi Kanthas.* There are four different types of embroidered quilts associated with Rajshahi: the *lohoi*, the cross stitch kantha, the *lik* kantha and the *sujni*. Each of these is distinct not only from the kanthas made elsewhere in Bangladesh but also from each other. It may be interesting to mention here that each type of Rajshahi kantha uses only one type of stitch throughout. While all the stitches found in the Rajshahi kanthas are also used in kanthas elsewhere, they are usually used with a variety of other stitches. In Rajshahi kanthas only one type of stitch is used in each kantha. Thus, the *lohoi*, a thick, stiff kantha meant to be spread on the webbed bedstead known as *charpai* uses a close running stitch throughout. The stitch is similar to the *chatai* or *pati phor*, but the effect is different as the spaces between the stitches in the *lohoi* are larger than the

<sup>4</sup> *Lokshilpa* (Dhaka, 1985), 59.



Detail of Faridpur kantha with Radha-Krishna scenes. Private collection



Detail of Faridpur kantha with Radha-Krishna scenes. Private collection

stitches themselves. The close stitching covers the entire field of the kantha, so that the very texture of the kantha undergoes a change. Motifs are few, being limited to the *lohorī* or wave motif, the diamond with its variations of the *charchala*, *aatchala*, *barochala*, and the *pan* motif. The muted colours of this type of kantha, the lack of variety of motif and design, and the considerable amount of time needed to make it, have gradually caused this kantha to fade in popularity. On the other hand, the "carpet" or bright cross stitch kanthas are more popular and quicker to embroider. Though they have somewhat paled in comparison to the Jessore kanthas, they are still being made, because they are still a bargain. The *sujni* too is still made at Rajshahi especially to give a girl as part of her dowry. Even people who have migrated to other parts of the country will send back to Rajshahi for a *sujni* to give a girl about to get married. However the *sujni* too has become less popular. It cannot, for instance, be used as a wallpiece as the newer kanthas can.

The *lik* kantha uses the *lik* stitch, the appearance of which is similar to the Holbein stitch. While this stitch is popular in other kantha-making areas as well, in Rajshahi it is used in this type of kantha to the exclusion of other stitches. The *lik* stitch as worked in Rajshahi tends to be larger than that worked elsewhere. Like the *sujni*, this kantha too uses red *salu* for the surface material.

**Jessore-Faridpur-Khulna Kanthas.** Some of the finest of traditional kanthas have been produced in Jessore, Faridpur and Khulna. The stitch used is the running stitch in its many variations, the material fine white sari or white *dhoti*.<sup>5</sup> Four saris are sufficient for a large kantha. Generally, threads drawn from sari borders were originally used to embroider the kantha, but new yarn was also used. Nowadays new yarn is used exclusively. However, unlike the Rajshahi kanthas, fewer strands of thread are used. These strands remain separate, not being twisted into one

<sup>5</sup> Though saris and *dhotis* were woven almost all over Bengal, fine saris were woven in Satkhira, Pabna, Dhaka, Jessore, Kishoreganj, Tangail.

as in Rajshahi. While both Jessore and Faridpur produce similar types of kanthas, there appears to be a difference between the two. Jessore kanthas are slightly more muted in colour. Even where bright colours are occasionally used in the Jessore kanthas, the areas so covered are small. The stitches in the Jessore kanthas are small and fine, producing a delicate look in the finest of these kanthas.

There are two types of kanthas produced at Jessore: *par tola* or sari border kanthas and *nakshi* kanthas. Some of the finest of border patterns are to be found in Jessore kanthas. Often stems of leaves or trunks of trees are worked in weave running border patterns.

In *nakshi* kanthas there is not only a wealth of motifs but also a wealth of embroidery stitches. The usual stitch in these kanthas is a small neat kantha *phor* or ripple stitch. The *kaitya* is often employed, not only for border patterns, but also for motifs and even for background. The *chatai* is used, specially for the wheel motif. This produces a satin stitch effect and often the only way of telling the difference is to see the reverse side of the kantha. The Jessore stitch is used for filling larger areas of colour, but an occasional use of the *bhorat* or filling stitch may also be found. Embroidery stitches similar to those found in Kashmiri shawls are often used to embroider the *kalka* motif. The chain, the herringbone, the open chain, the zigzag stitch, the darning stitch, an occasional buttonhole stitch for edges, may also be found.

Colours employed in Jessore kanthas are red, black, blue, green, yellow and occasionally pink. The total effect of the use of colour is, as has been pointed out, generally quieter than in the Faridpur and Khulna kanthas which the Jessore kanthas resemble. Sayeed Ahmed, for example, notes, that "Exquisite floral designs in subdued colours are distinct in Jessore quilts."<sup>6</sup> Sometimes one comes across a kantha where there are only a few touches of colour. The beauty of such a kantha depends on the interplay of diamond and triangular forms in the white rippled field.

<sup>6</sup> "Bangladesh Handicrafts," *Bangladesh Handicrafts*, 1974 (Dhaka, 1974), 4.

Kanthas from this region are a veritable treasure chest of motifs and scenes. Common motifs are the central lotus, the tree-of-life, the *kalka*, the betel leaf, the *shostir chinho*, the wheel, the *rath*, peacocks, parrots, elephants, tigers, horses, men, women, mythological deities and flowers. Apart from these, domestic articles and farm implements also find their place in the kantha. Toilet articles—the comb, a mirror, a *surmadani*, earrings—are very popular and become symbols of marriage. The palanquin finds a place in the kantha as does a train. Truly scenic kanthas are also to be found. In one such kantha the central figure of the goddess Lakshmi is surrounded by a circle of dancing women. Beside this group are two *raths*. Another kantha seems to tell a story, beginning with a marriage procession, through a fight with a tiger and a journey by train.

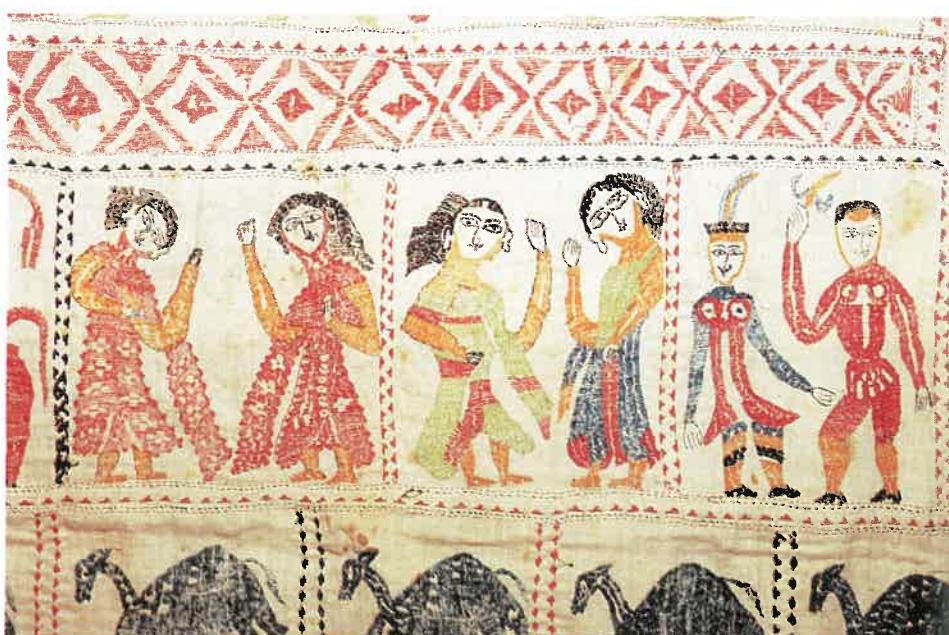
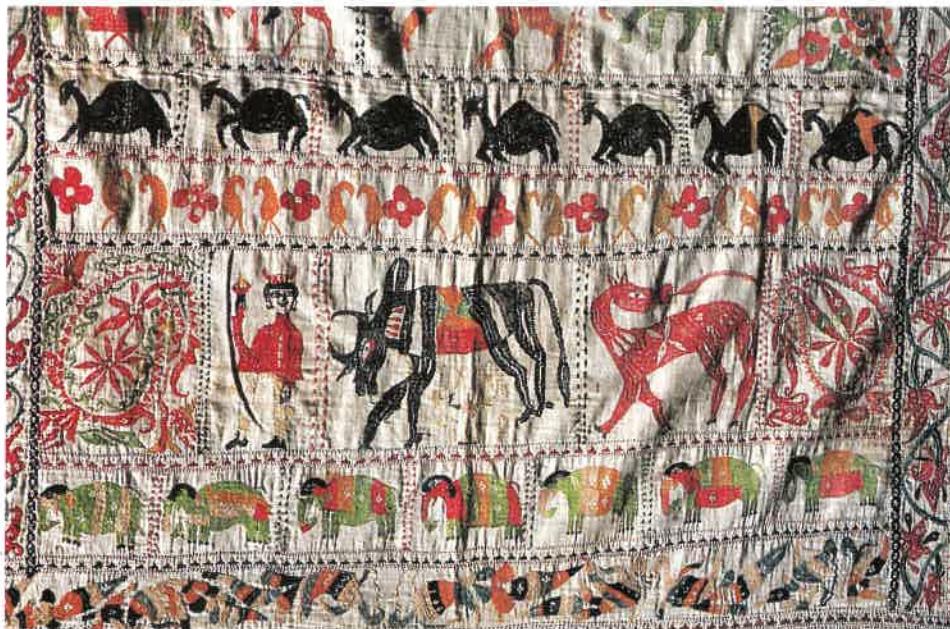
There are some very fine specimens of kanthas from this region in museums. The first kantha acquired for the Bangladesh National Museum, at that time still at Nimtali, was a nineteenth-century kantha from Gopalganj, Faridpur. Another exquisite kantha from this region, which was upto the partition, home to well-to-do Hindu zamindars, is Manadasundari's kantha at the Gurusaday Museum, Thakurpukur. Its wealth of scenes and variety of patterns and textures testifies to the fine quality that kanthas could achieve.

*Mymensingh-Jamalpur Kanthas.* With the kantha revival and the BRAC work in this region, Jamalpur kanthas dominate. Hence it might be better to designate this type Mymensingh-Jamalpur rather than just Mymensingh.

Kanthas of Mymensingh and Jamalpur districts are different from those of Rajshahi as well as Jessore. They are colourful and attractive, with both a variety of colours and motifs—and in this way are similar to the kanthas of Jessore. Red, blue, yellow and green are the predominant colours used, but occasionally black and even pink may be found. Vines, the lotus, the sun, the wheel, fish, birds and the *kalka* are frequent motifs. These kanthas may, however, be easily distinguished from those of either Faridpur or Jessore. Large areas of colour are absent in these kanthas,



Exceptionally fine kantha from Barisal, Bangladesh National Museum



Detail of Barisal kantha depicting human and animal forms as well as Siva and his bull, Nandi. Bangladesh National Museum

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Detail of Faridpur kantha. Bangladesh National Museum

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Par tola bostani. Bangladesh National Museum

motifs being generally filled with either the kantha *phor* or the darning stitch. Thread is more sparingly used in these kanthas. While Jessore kanthas sometimes come close to sophisticated art, Mymensingh kanthas are generally "folk" art. Large birds perch on diminutive elephants, unrecognizable horses prance around on spindly legs.

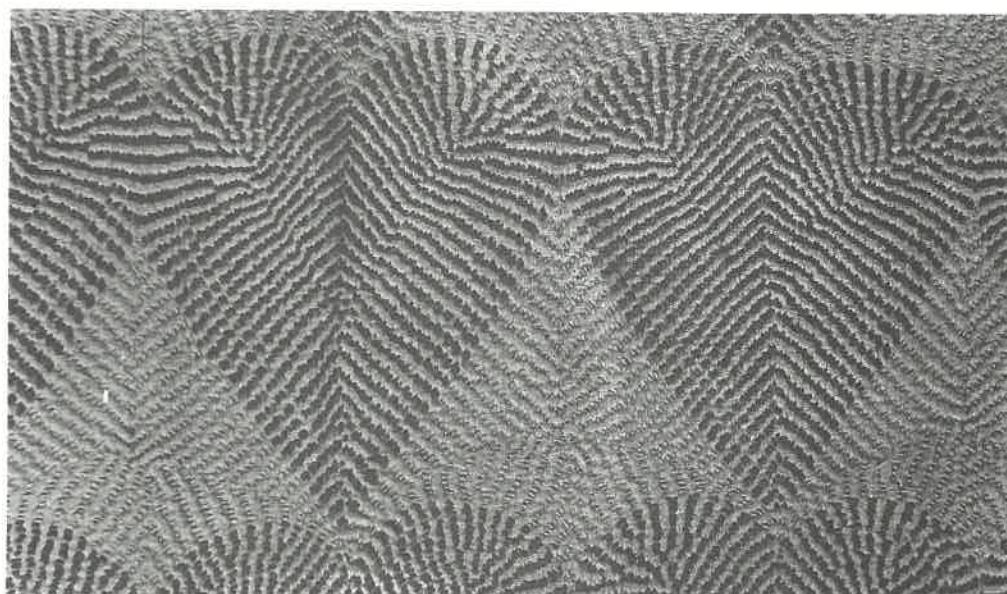
Borders embroidered in these kanthas are generally simple. We do not find the elaborate *par tola* kantha here. Nor are border patterns used to embroider stems as in Jessore or even Kushtia kanthas. Borders are usually based on the threaded running stitch. With the encouragement given to these delicate-looking borders at the BRAC centre at Jamalpur, kanthas at Aarong lend to have these borders rather than the weave-running borders of the Jessore kanthas.

Apart from these three areas, other districts like Kushtia, Bogra, Rangpur, Pabna, Barisal, also produce kanthas. Many of these kanthas may be seen to have characteristics similar to both the Rajshahi *lohorī* and the Jessore kanthas. This type might be designated as the **Kushtia-Bogra kantha**. Kustia-Bogra kanthas have characteristics common to both Rajshahi and Jessore kanthas. Like Rajshahi kanthas they are generally thick, seven saris being used to make a kantha. In the stitching as well they have a hard, ridged effect, similar to that of Rajshahi kanthas. In the Rajshahi *lohorī*, however, the stitch is smaller than the space between the stitches depends on the motif to be embroidered. Apart from the *chatai*, Kushtia kanthas also use the *kaitya*, the kantha *phor* and weave running stitch for border patterns. While the use of these stitches reminds one of Jessore kanthas, Kushtia work is not as fine as that of Jessore. In the last few years colourful kanthas are being produced at Kushtia. One of the finest of Bogra kanthas is perhaps a *jainamaz* made by Lutfunnessa Begum which uses the kantha *phor*, *anarasi*, *kaitya*, *chatai* and chain for a very attractive piece.

Functional kanthas, with a minimum of stitching, are made all over Bangladesh. The background is rarely embroidered with the rippling kantha *phor*. Instead, fine



Asan kantha from Khulna



Lohori kantha with betel leaf motif

stitches run in straight lines across the kantha to hold the several layers of cloth together. The motifs are sparingly stitched, large ones being outlined, often with the chain stitch. Borders are often simple. But, even here, one occasionally comes across an exceptional kantha. The Bangladesh National Museum houses a very fine kantha from Barisal. The central focus is a *sahasradal padma* within a square. Fine border patterns enclose the central *mandala*. Rows of motifs are embroidered breadthwise across the kantha: human figures engaged in various activities, camels, elephants, a lion, the god Siva, his bull Nandi.

These regional differences are, however, in danger of dying out. With increased training in kantha work, with commercialization and quality control, with designs being giving by designers based on what will sell, it is possible that these differences will soon be wiped out. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that while regional differences might be eliminated, differences perhaps will still remain, but most possibly associated with different organizations rather than with regions.

The Aarong-Kumudini kanthas are similar to each other, as both organizations have attempted to stay as close to the tradition as possible. Here too, however, differences may be noted. Both Aarong and Kumudini use the running stitch, the *kaitya*, the *chatai* or *pati phor*. In addition, they also use the *bhorat* to fill areas. Perhaps Kumudini goes a little heavier on the *bhorat* stitch. On the other hand, the Aarong kantha, which originated from the centre at Jamalpur, tends to favour, especially for borders, the delicate threaded running stitches in its many incarnations. Kumudini kanthas also tend to differ from the Aarong kanthas in their use of vegetable dyes and muted colours for their characteristic kanthas. There is an over-fondness it seems for shades of green, blue, brown, a dull maroon—perhaps in an attempt to replicate the muted shades of traditional kanthas. Folk Bangla, which caters to expatriates, mainly prefers light pinks, blues and beige. Aarong outlets market their own kanthas as well as Arshi-Salesian tapestries. In 2009, in celebration of its thirtieth anniversary,

Aarong explored old designs in new ways. It replicated some fine old pieces as well as searched them for new ideas. Their products were, however, going by the price list, far above what the average Bangladeshi could pay.

## Kantha Revival

In Bangladesh, the artists Zainul Abedin and Quamrul Hasan were influential in reviving the traditional arts of Bengal. Hasan's efforts in this direction led him to adopt a distinctive folk style in his art, and also helped in the establishment of the Design Centre at East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, the present BSCIC—which has contributed—though in a much smaller way than it could have—to the revival of the kantha, along with other folk arts and handicrafts. Zainul Abedin's attempts at nourishing folk art led him to projecting the need for a folk art museum, and led finally to the establishment of the Folk Art and Crafts Foundation at Sonargaon—though the museum has not as yet achieved its full potential. Abedin also personally collected kanthas since the early fifties—some of the finest of the extant kanthas are in his collection—hoping that some day these would be preserved in the museum. Only a few of the kanthas collected by him are, however, to be found at the Folk Art and Crafts Foundation. The Bangla Academy also contributed, though in an indirect way. Mohammad Sayeedur, a collector at the Bangla Academy, had also been associated with Zainul Abedin in collecting kanthas. When attempts were made, in the early seventies, to revive indigenous crafts, Mohammad Sayeedur was approached and proved immensely instrumental in collecting kanthas. Thus kantha enthusiasts were able to use these as models to develop new kanthas and as displays at craft exhibitions of the traditional arts of Bengal.

Despite the interest of Zainul Abedin in kanthas, the attempts by EPSCIC at producing indigenous handicrafts,

and the embroidery of a few fine pieces, the kantha remained a lost craft until after the liberation of Bangladesh. The kantha revival may perhaps be linked to two factors: a sense of national difference which inspired the resurgence of indigenous crafts, and the need to provide for women left destitute during the war. As Hameeda Hossain notes in "Organising Women's Employment Through Kantha Production," the first attempts at kantha revival took place as early as 1972 with women in kantha-producing regions being encouraged to make kanthas for commercial purposes.<sup>1</sup> The link between kanthas and commercialization was therefore established early, but the kantha revival did not get under way for another ten years. It should be pointed out that these were not the first kanthas to be made for the market. Earlier kanthas too had often been made against payment. The difference between these earlier kanthas and the later ones was that initially an individual maker would be commissioned to make a kantha. The later products were made by women's organizations for generally unknown customers.

The second step towards the kantha revival was taken in 1974 with the holding of a National Handicrafts Exhibition. It was inspired greatly by Zainul Abedin who had long sought to give due recognition to the indigenous crafts of Bangladesh. The purposes of this first national handicrafts exhibition were described as follows:

The first national handicraft exhibition organised by an ad hoc committee of individuals seeks to:

- 1) introduce folk crafts to the urban world;
- 2) help preserve the existing crafts and improve production;
- 3) project the vast possibility in this field, as well as to
- 4) gain an insight into the problems faced by the artisans in improving their production and techniques.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition came as an eye-opener to many Bangladeshis who were unaware of their own crafts. The success of the exhibition led to the setting up of a

<sup>1</sup> *Woven Air: The Kantha and Muslin Tradition of Bangladesh*, ed. Paul Bonaventura and Beth Stockley (London, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *Bangladesh Handicrafts* 1974, 3.

permanent craft sales centre. With two lakh taka, the Bangladesh Hastashilpa Samabaya Federation began with its outlet Karika, located just across the road from Hotel Intercontinental (later Hotel Sheraton and now Ruposhi Bangla). Karika was the first organization to attempt to make kanthas on a commercial scale. However, the large kanthas on display tended to be few and far between. Red carpet kanthas predominated. Traditional kanthas were few. On a small scale, there was an attempt to make ladies' purses, place-mats, and dress fronts/panels with kantha embroidery.

From 1974-1980, Karika led the revival of indigenous crafts. This success of Karika was, unfortunately, to prove a setback. The next five years saw rapid expansion and, for the first time, Karika suffered losses. Part of this was due to the strong competition from other similar organizations that had emerged, part due to mismanagement. Karika has not regained its once monopolistic hold on the handicrafts market. However, it has continued to function. One of its best contributions to handicrafts and the kantha is the *Survey of Folk Crafts and Design Documentation*, prepared by Tofail Ahmed, Hameeda Hossain and Mohammad Sayeedur, in 1988. Initiated in 1985, the Survey of Folk Crafts and Design Documentation Project documented over 5,000 folk designs from Bangladeshi villages. Under this project *Nakshamala*—a set of design cards with folk motifs—was produced. The first *Nakshamala* set was *Nakshi Kantha*. (Others were *Nakshi Pitha*, *Nakshi Pankha* and *Paper Cut Designs*.) These drawings make the rich tradition of the kantha available to everyone.

BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) began on a low key in 1972—just a couple of years earlier than Karika—but, with its more centralized organization, it was able to proceed steadily. It was also able to engage the services of several well-paid consultants to develop distinct areas. Thus, BRAC was the first organization to launch the *jamdani* with a big bang in the mid-seventies. After the *jamdani* came the kantha. In 1979 BRAC introduced kantha-making at its project in Jamalpur. With its well-developed marketing strategy, BRAC started producing small kantha

articles based on the traditional kantha skills of the Jamalpur area.

It was around this time that the Sonargaon Hotel was being planned. The hotel was to represent Bangladesh in miniature. What could be more Bangladeshi than the kantha? Thus, among the decor the kantha would be included. The management approached Aarong, the handicrafts outlet sponsored by the Mennonite Church Council, but also associated with BRAC and where the BRAC kantha items were sold. Aarong had by now established a reputation for itself as the patron and outlet for Bangladeshi crafts of quality. Would Aarong be able to produce kanthas similar to those in Stella Kramrisch's collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art? Aarong had not, so far, done anything as ambitious, but it was willing to give it a try. Involved in the kantha project at this time were Sally Smith, Razia Quadir, Bunny Page—an Indian Parsi married to an Englishman—and Sister Michael Francis—an American nun who had involved herself with handicrafts, first with the successful jute works at Jagaroni, located next to Holy Cross College in Tejgaon, and then with Aarong. It was at this time that the artist Surayia Rahman was approached to design a kantha for Sonargaon. Choosing three scenes from photographs of Stella Kramrisch's collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—a boat scene, a dancing scene and a hunting scene—Surayia Rahman designed a "new" kantha. Razia Quadir, who was mainly designing silk saris for Aarong, also designed a kantha. Quadir did not attempt to copy old kanthas. Instead, she sought to capture the essence of rural Bengal and included that most romantic of rural scenes: the marriage palanquin. Both Surayia Rahman's design—copied several times, in different variations—and Razia Quadir's—obliterating the central lotus and focusing on rural Bengal—have influenced subsequent kanthas.

When the time came, however, to execute the kantha on cloth, Aarong hesitated. It was just about this time that Aarong, until now controlled by the Mennonite Church Council, was being handed over to BRAC. The women at the Jamalpur project had never made anything as

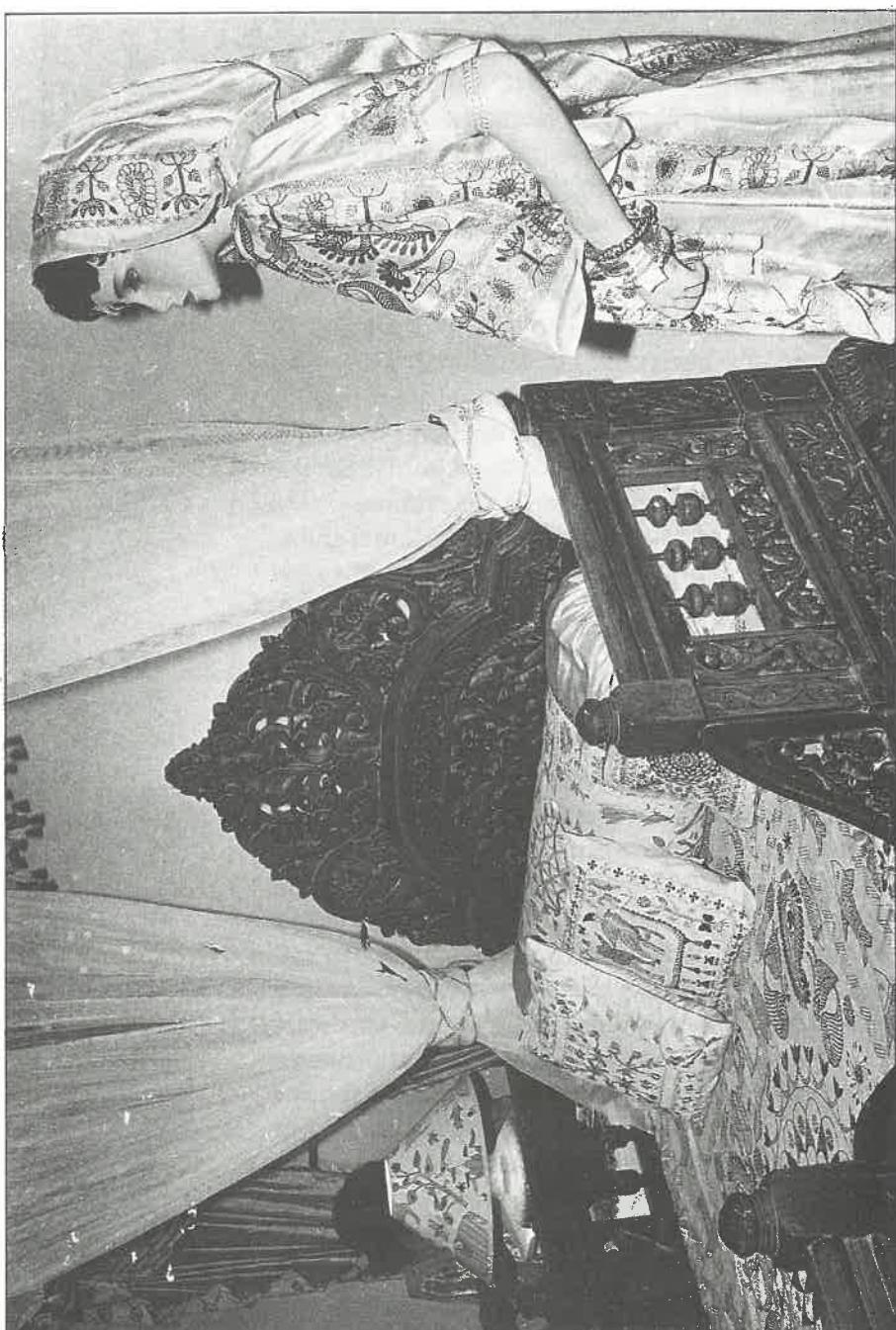


Modern Kumudini kantha with "folk" motifs

ambitious as the newly designed kanthas. The finished kantha was to be so huge that it would have to be made in sections and then put together afterwards. Wanting to be associated with the kantha revival, BRAC nevertheless was doubtful whether the revival could actually take place in Bangladesh itself. They were, however, willing to undertake the project, but with the work being done by Thai workers. The cost would, of course, be astronomical. It was at this point that Sister Michael Francis stepped in.<sup>3</sup> Having worked with Bangladeshi women in jute works, she realized that they could be trained to embroider kanthas, which had, after all, been their traditional skill. She accordingly approached Kumudini with a proposal. If Kumudini was willing to cooperate with her, she could help train women to make kanthas. Kumudini had the organization, she had the energy and determination to reacquaint Bangladeshi women with their traditional skills. Kumudini was willing and thus became the first, with Surayia Rahman's adaptation and Razia Quadir's design, to really initiate the kantha revival. Thus BRAC, which had spent several years training women in their kantha project at Jamalpur, was not there when the kantha was launched.

Training in kantha work at Kumudini involved teaching mainly three stitches: the kantha stitch, the weave running stitch, and the *bhorat* or filling stitch, which workers at Kumudini referred to as the Kashmiri *bhorat* but is actually the Romanian stitch. The women were shown how the true kantha stitch was not a darning stitch. The stitches had to penetrate all the layers of the cloth, and they had to fall slightly ahead or behind the previous rows. It was only thus that the characteristic ripples of the kantha could be produced. The women were also taught to use the weave running stitch to create border patterns replicating the *par* patterns of sari borders. But, apart from acquiring traditional kantha skills, the workers also learned a filling stitch to fill in large expanses of colour. In traditional kanthas, these large expanses of colour are filled by typical kantha stitches: darning stitches, either minute pin-dot

<sup>3</sup> All attempts to contact Sister Mike—as she was generally called—failed. Information about her role was gathered from others.



At a kantha exhibition organized by BRAC/Shilpakala in 1992

stitches or an interwoven darning stitch, *kaitya*, *chatai* or the kantha stitch. This process of working is slow, and, moreover, produces a muted effect. If the *bhorat* stitch is used instead, not only are the large expanses of colour filled in quickly, but the final result is also brighter. To distinguish between work using the *bhorat* and kantha work, Kumudini workers refer to embroidery using the *bhorat* stitch as "tapestry" and embroidery predominantly using the kantha stitch as *nakshi*. Workers also learned a fourth stitch: the stem or *dal*, which was used to outline motifs. Workers were taught finishing, how to begin and end neatly, clipping off loose threads.

Kumudini's greatest contribution, perhaps, has been in the kantha training it initiated. Initially started for the Sonargaon kanthas, the training programme has helped provide training in kantha work to women from several parts of Bangladesh. Batches of women, under the ILO training scheme, would come to Kumudini for a month's training. They would go back home subsequently, and help make kanthas and provide training to other women as well. Thus while Kumudini did not have branches as BRAC does in different *upazilas*, the women who went out after training helped spread the influence of Kumudini to other parts of Bangladesh as well. Back in their own village, these women continued to do kantha work, supplementing the family income and continuing to produce kanthas and kantha embroidery.

Though BRAC could not be associated in the initial kantha breakthrough, it did not take long for it to catch up and become associated with the kantha in a big way. Realizing that the kantha could be made in Bangladesh once again, BRAC expanded the Jamalpur project to include more ambitious kanthas. The advantage that BRAC had over Kumudini was that the workers lived near enough to be able to come to the centres and work there. At Kumudini work was always taken home. Better organized and financially stronger than Kumudini, BRAC has—through its outlet Aarong—helped make the kantha a household word. Able to provide facilities for its designers to visit Gurusaday Museum and Ashutosh Museum in

Calcutta and get an exposure to kanthas, Aarong is encouraging the creation of new designs. Kumudini, on the other hand, appears to rely on its original fund of designs. The "Story of Stitches" exhibition, organized by Aarong to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary, was very different in scale and design from its first kantha exhibition at Shilpakala Academy in 1992. The pieces produced were larger, for example, the colours more vibrant. From its one kantha centre at Jamalpur set up in 1986, Aarong now has a total of four with the addition of centres at Jessore (1991), Sherpur (1996) and Kushtia (1997).

In March 1982, BRAC and Kumudini were joined by another NGO involved in kantha making. Surayia Rahman, who had been casually involved with Karika and Aarong, was approached by a Canadian, Maureen Berlin, with a proposal to set up a kantha centre. Surayia Rahman would work on the design and the embroidery; Maureen Berlin would work on marketing and at making the organization a women's development project. Initially, an attempt was made to call the organization "Nakshi Kantha Kendra," but as the pieces planned were very definitely not kanthas proper—much as they had been influenced by kantha embroidery—the centre had to settle for the unwieldy name: Skill Development for Underprivileged Women. However, "Nakshi Kantha Kendra" was used as a subtitle, the Bengali "equivalent," and would later be the name of its marketing outlet. SDUW was an example of the changes taking place in the kantha, as well as an example of the role of the kantha in women's development.

Like other organizations involved in handicrafts, SDUW was also devoted to women's development. However, while the other organizations were somewhat loosely organized, SDUW was highly organized in this regard. Thus while the women were trained in kantha making and embroidery, they also received health care and family planning advice. Their children, if under three, were provided day care on the premises, if older were educated. Meals were provided to the children who accompanied their mothers. However, to encourage family planning,

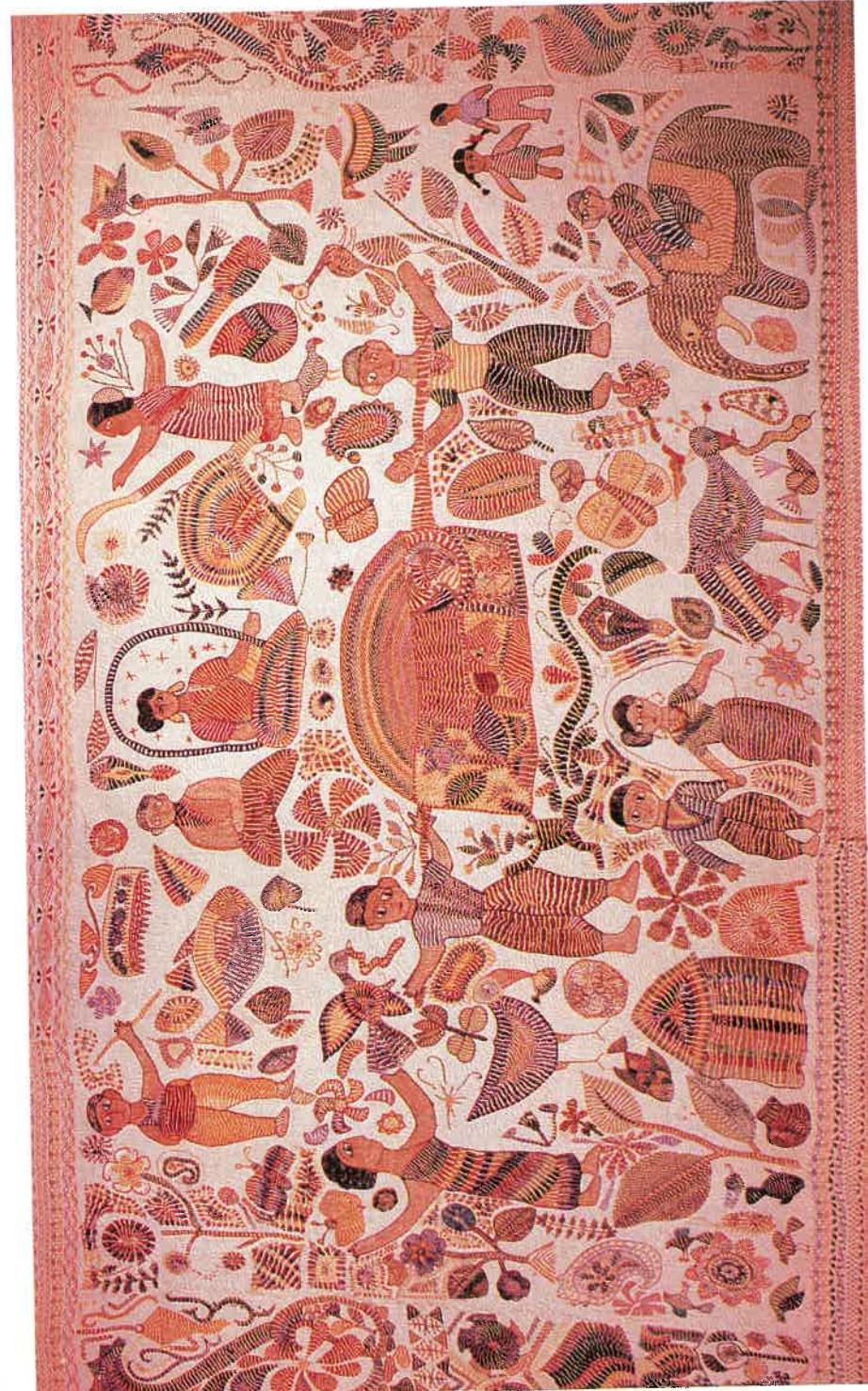


Nakshi tapestry of Behula on a raft with her dead husband. St. Paul's Sewing Centre, Shelabunia



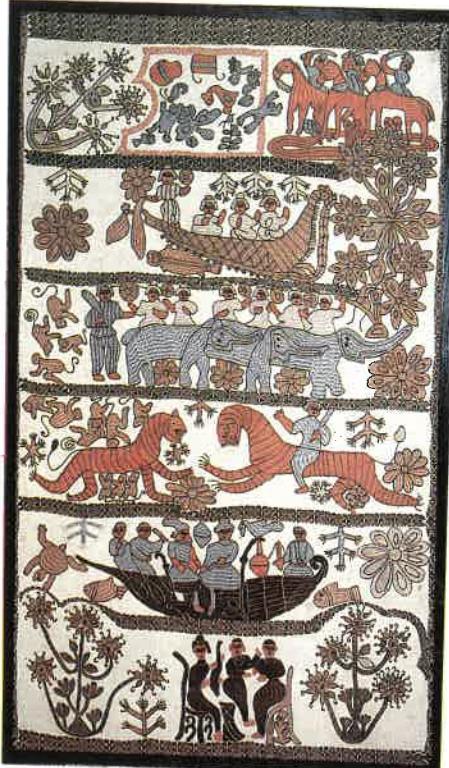
*Sojan Badiyar Ghat*: Wall-hanging designed by Surayia Rahman based on Jasim Uddin's poem

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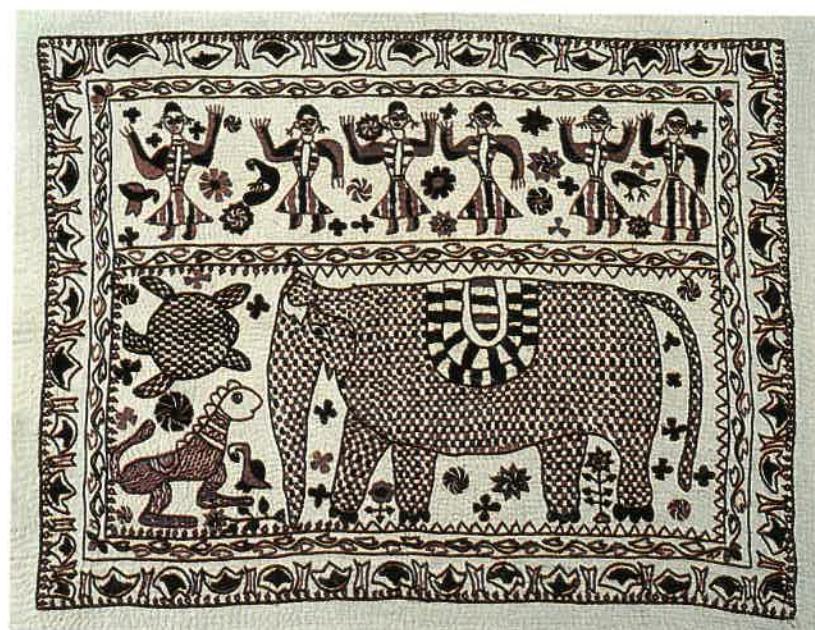


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Kantha designed by Razia Quadir for Hotel Sonargaon



Kumudini wall-hanging



Aarong cushion cover

care for more than two children was not given. The women were encouraged to be independent. Meals were not provided, but women could make a small contribution and a wholesome lunch was prepared with the money collected for the day. Women were taught hygiene and social skills. They were encouraged, rather expected, to bring a guardian when they first came, in order to encourage the development of the entire family and ensure domestic harmony.

At the same time, SDUW was an example of extreme commercialization and factory-type production. This did not, however, mean slipshod work, but the highly regulated work that we associate with factories as well as the division of labour that is a concomitant of mass production. It must be noted that SDUW work—especially that begun by Surayia Rahman—was sophisticated art, and extreme care was taken to make the kanthas/tapestries exquisite works of art. The process was designed with extreme care by Surayia Rahman—a process that she later adopted when she moved out from SDUW to her own organization, Arshi. Initially working with Surayia Rahman's designs, the SDUW had a repertoire of 80 designs. These designs were embroidered and kept in a display room so that future copies could be made on the basis of these designs. SDUW claimed that only 250 editions of any one design would be made. The number of designs went up somewhat with the addition of other designers. However, SDUW relied mainly on the designs created by Surayia Rahman, and, towards the end on "rural" designs in books.

A brief description of the working of SDUW, initiated by Surayia Rahman—and continued at her own organization, Arshi—will give a fairly good idea of how different their work was from traditional kantha work. Working from drawings, Surayia Rahman would make blueprints of the designs. These designs would then be traced onto the cloth. In order to ensure that there was no distortion in the lines, she would again go over the lines on the cloth. The design traced, it would then be given to the "thread girls" to sort out the coloured threads necessary for the embroidery.

The SDUW kanthas were made mainly for display as wall-hangings, so to ensure that there was no puckering of the cloth and no unevenness in the finished products, women used embroidery hoops. Working with the *bhorat*, the women covered large areas of the cloth with close embroidery. The background of the tapestry was covered with close darning stitches, rather than the kantha stitch, thus eliminating the characteristic ripples of the kantha. This process continued at SDUW for some time after the departure of Surayia Rahman.

The SDUW kanthas were planned with an eye on a foreign, sophisticated market, a market that had been prepared by the work of Aarong and Kumudini. Thus, instead of cotton, silk was used, and, in order to ensure perfection, trained girls embroidered faces. These "face-girls" as they were called, worked on the faces to achieve uniformly attractive and pleasant features. In order to ensure that they did not get thoroughly bored with their work, they were allowed to work on tapestries a few hours each day. From 8 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon they worked on faces. Then from 3 to 5 they worked on embroidery.

Once the tapestry was finished, it was washed. Then, while still damp, it was stretched and mounted on a wooden frame slightly larger than the tapestry. The tapestry was allowed to dry on the frame. The SDUW kanthas, therefore, succeeded in eliminating uneven kanthas and "ugly" human features that often ruin kanthas. Some very fine pieces were executed at SDUW, but the astronomical prices of the SDUW tapestries restricted purchases to foreigners and those few Bangladeshis whose incomes bear no relation to the Bangladeshi average. For instance, in 1990, a piece based on Jasim Uddin's *Sojan Badiyar Ghat*, cost Taka 28,000.

SDUW had perhaps effected the greatest change in kantha embroidery, both in stitchcraft and themes. Surayia Rahman introduced themes based on folk tales, legends, narrative and dramatic poems. Just as Jasim Uddin had been inspired by the work of Bengali women to write about

the embroidered quilt, so too did Surayia Rahman, inspired by Jasim Uddin's poem, try to make kanthas that told stories as Shaju's kantha did. In his poem, Jasim Uddin imaginatively recreated an embroidered quilt into which a Bengali woman might weave the joys and sorrows of her life, and Surayia Rahman in turn embroidered the poet's vision in an embroidered quilt. One art influenced the other, and then was again influenced by it. While drawing upon Jasim Uddin's poems, Surayia Rahman also designed scenes from rural Bengal. She was also aware of the nostalgia for a Mughal<sup>4</sup> and colonial past. Thus, she has designed Mughal scenes as well as scenes depicting the British Raj.

While one might not agree with Surayia Rahman's use of Mughal scenes for kantha work, or her interpolating non-folk elements into kantha embroidery, there is no doubt that Surayia Rahman is an artist. The typical Surayia Rahman tapestry is packed with motifs and scenes similar to the traditional kantha. Furthermore, there is a creative impulse in her work, which does not merely replicate old kanthas. Though she borrowed from old kanthas for the Sonargaon kantha, she did not copy the design blindly. For instance, the gentleman smoking a *hookah* is not ensconced in his chair, he seems to be rising from it. The design has been copied countless times since Surayia Rahman first drew it, but she explained why there is a gap between the gentleman and the chair: "He is rising from his chair in ecstasy at the dancers."

Critics of SDUW were quick to point out that, lovely as the tapestries were, they were not true kanthas. Nevertheless, drawing on the kantha tradition, the SDUW tapestries had attracted people who had not been quite won over by the Aarong and Kumudini muted work. Working with folk scenes, idealized rural scenes, as well with folk tales and Jasim Uddin's narrative poems, SDUW created colourful, bright kanthas. These colourful, bright kanthas have influenced Aarong and Kumudini as well.

<sup>4</sup> In 2008, Dhaka celebrated 400 years of the city. While Dhaka did not spring into being 400 years ago, it was in 1608 that Dhaka was announced as the Mughal capital of Bengal.

In 1988, following a dispute over copyright, Surayia Rahman left SDUW and started her own organization, Arshi. The story behind her break with SDUW suggests the great difference between the commercial kantha and the earlier traditional one. There were no copyrights on traditional motifs and designs. Kantha-makers borrowed freely, imitating closely where they would, deviating when they wished.

Each Surayia Rahman piece, however, is stamped unmistakably hers. Suraiya Rahman's *nakshi* tapestry was very popular among expatriates, especially Italians, who helped computerize her designs and arrange exhibitions in Italy. When Father Rigon, an Italian priest based in Shelabunia, Khulna, was looking for someone to train needlewomen at St. Paul's Sewing Centre, he chose Surayia Rahman. Batches of women were sent to Arshi for training. They returned to SPSC with the skills that Surayia Rahman had developed at SDUW. The SPSC pieces draw largely from Christian themes, though scenes from Bengali legends are also embroidered.

In January 2008, Surayia Rahman handed over Arshi to the Salesian Sisters, as she was in poor health. The pieces designed by Surayia Rahman for Arshi are made and marketed as Arshi-Salesian.

Since the early 80s, Sayyada R. Ghuznavi had been working with a small group of women and young girls in Chilmari and Kurigram in an effort to revive kanthas typical to the region. Latifa Begum and others of the group were shown a selection of photographs and a few examples of old kanthas. Based on these, the women executed one-of-a-kind kanthas. Since 1983, limited editions of kanthas have been produced by the group, exclusively in natural dyed yam. They are commissioned and marketed by Aranya at home and abroad. Broad outlines and layouts are prepared in advance, with the craftswomen having the liberty to select the border designs, additional motifs and the combination of stitches and colours, adding to the beauty of each kantha. One of these pieces won Latifa Begum the National Award for Master Craftsman in 1984.

From its quiet beginning in 1974, the kantha has emerged as one of the living crafts of Bangladesh. There has been change and adaptation; old designs have been arranged in new ways; contemporary scenes have been embroidered in traditional stitches. There have been good and bad kanthas; much work has been of poor quality. But in this profusion of kanthas, one or two really excellent pieces have emerged that would never have been possible without this revival.

Perhaps what is most important is that the revival of an almost lost art has provided several thousand women with a livelihood. Also, as most organizations have literacy, savings, health projects, these women have benefited in manifold ways. Moreover, inability to purchase really exquisite pieces has a positive side to it. At the BRAC/ Shilpakala Nakshi Kantha exhibition in April, 1992, several earnest young women—not associated with any handicrafts organization—were busily copying down borders and motifs, and learning how to embroider from the kantha-makers exhibiting their kantha-making skills. Like the kantha-makers of old, these women were learning how to make kanthas for love, not money.

It is also necessary at this point to talk about the kantha revival in West Bengal. The revival of this traditional Bengal art took place in West Bengal at about the same time as in Bangladesh. The "ethnic" look had become popular. Moreover, the influx of refugees from Bangladesh during the 1971 war also encouraged the development of a craft known to them.

The kantha revival in West Bengal was, however, more geared to dress fashions. Thus kantha embroidery was used to embellish saris, *kameezes* and shawls. While the kantha revival in Bangladesh attempted consciously to revive a traditional craft and then use it for contemporary purposes, in West Bengal the kantha revival was initially more commercialized. Thus "attractive" designs were sought, designs which would catch the eye and sell. The common designs—labelled "Santiniketan" because of the work produced in this area—tended to be floral, more akin



Santiniketan kantha embroidery showing use of herringbone

to the arabesques of Rajshahi *sujni* embroidery than to traditional kantha motifs. Colours used for the embroidery were bright. To enable quicker production, thicker strands of thread were used. Stitches too tended to be larger. The herringbone, popularly called the Gujarati stitch, was used to fill expanses of colour. Background stitching was absent. The rapidity of execution led to a reduction in costs. Thus, in the early 90's one could buy a *tussore* sari worked in kantha embroidery for Rs. 1500, whereas at SDUW the embroidery alone on a sari might cost Taka 3000.

Another feature of West Bengal work is the "Indianization" of the designs, rather than a conscious recreation of traditional Bengal motifs. In early Bengal kanthas, the women may be seen in various costumes. Some, for instance, appear to be dressed in *choli* and *ghagra*. However, the female figures in these old kanthas still seem to belong to the Bengal countryside. On the other hand, the new West Bengal kanthas have designs where in feature and in dress women appear Rajasthani. The Bengal kantha artist usually drew her faces frontally, but many West Bengal kantha artists, perhaps in imitation of the *chamba rumals*, are drawing profiles. The god Ganesh is also making his appearance—not very surprising as much of the kantha revival, as Asis Chakraborty, Curator of the Gurusaday Museum, pointed out, has been at the initiative of the Marwari business community.<sup>5</sup> Similarly in Bangladesh, socio-cultural factors are also distinguishing new kanthas from traditional ones. There is thus, in several new kanthas, an "Islamization," which often leads to the attempt to claim a Mughal heritage. It is not Surayia Rahman alone who is designing Mughal scenes for kanthas.

Because of the tendency of folk art to absorb different influences, and because the kantha revival was made with an eye on the market, it is not surprising that the kantha revival in Bangladesh and West Bengal should show these divergences. West Bengal is, after all, a part of India; Bangladesh is a separate nation attempting to establish a separate cultural identity.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, February 24, 1993.

However, while much of the kantha work in West Bengal is strictly and unabashedly commercial, there are a number of organizations which are trying to revive the old tradition. Thus the kanthas produced at the kantha centres of the Crafts Council of West Bengal attempt to replicate in design and stitchcraft the old kanthas preserved in museums. What is very remarkable is that they have attempted to avoid the *bhorat*—unlike Bangladeshi kantha-makers—and are using the running stitch even for filling motifs. Apart from the interwoven darning stitch, they are also reproducing the ribbed running stitch and the diminutive running stitch. Thus along with the variegated designs and textures created by the kantha stitch and the *kaitya* and *chatai*, the Crafts Council kanthas have ribbed areas interspersed with minuscule dots.

In both Bangladesh and West Bengal today may be seen the conscious attempt to revive a lost craft, as well as the temptation for complacency and rapid production of popular designs. At the same time there is an endeavour to recreate a lost tradition where art and craft blend into one indistinguishable whole.

# Kantha Collections<sup>1</sup>

## Bangladesh

### Public Collections:

Bangla Academy  
 Design Centre, BSCIC  
 Folk Art and Crafts Foundation  
 Sonargaon  
 Bangladesh National Museum

### Private Collections:

Sayyada R. Ghuznavi  
 Hameeda Hossain  
 Mohammed Sayeedur  
 Tofail Ahmed  
 Jahanara Abedin  
 (The Zainul Abedin Collection)

## India

Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata  
 Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad  
 Gurusaday Museum, Thakurpukur  
 Indian Museum, Kolkata  
 Weaver's Studio, Kolkata  
 Victoria Memorial, Kolkata  
 Indian National Museum

## France

Association pour l'Etude et la Documentation des  
 Textiles d'Aise

<sup>1</sup> Some of this information is drawn from *Woven Air*.

## Japan

Hiroko Iwatake Collection

## United Kingdom

British Library (India Office Library and Records)  
 Leicestershire Museums  
 National Museums of Scotland  
 Victoria and Albert Museum

## United States of America

Peabody Museum, Salem  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia  
 The Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.  
 The Textile Museum, Washington D.C.

## Craft Organizations which Make Kanthas

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC),  
 outlet Aarong  
 Kumudini Welfare Trust  
 Karika  
 Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa, Jessore  
 Friends of Bangladesh, Tongi  
 Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation  
 (BSCIC)  
 Aranya  
 Nari Kalyan Sangstha, Magura

Organizations which have been influenced by kanthas  
 but make tapestry that is not strictly kantha are the  
 following:

Arshi-Salesian  
 Jamnakshi  
 St. Paul's Sewing Centre, Shelabunia

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## Glossary

*Aatchala* : with eight triangles or segments; term derived from *aatchala*, meaning eight-roofed. *Chala* refers to the sloping roofs of huts. Thus roofs can be *dochala*, with two segments, or *charchala* having four segments.

*Addhi* : fine white cloth.

*Almirah* : closet.

*Alpana* : ritual drawings painted on the floor with a paste of ground rice flour.

*Anaj taga* : lit. vegetable border; a border pattern resembling a row of beans.

*Anarasi* : resembling a pineapple; name of a pattern worked with the *lik phor*, the effect resembling the Holbein stitch; known as *lik phul* at Rajshahi.

*Anna* : food; sustenance.

*Apas* : peace.

*Arshi* : mirror.

*Arshilata* : wrap for mirror.

*Asan* : seat.

*Astadal padma* : eight-petaled lotus.

*Bakhya* : the back stitch.

*Balish kantha* : a pillow cover, spread on top of the pillow.

*Balisher chapa, oshar* : a pillow cover, spread on top of the pillow.

*Barfi* : diamond-shaped motif.

*Barochala* : with twelve triangles, or segments; see *aatchala*.

*Bashon dhakar rumal* : a cover for plates.

*Batua* : bag, purse.

<i>Beki</i>	: wavy.
<i>Beri</i>	: a pair of curved tongs meant for pots.
<i>Bhaduli Brata</i>	
<i>Alpana</i>	: an <i>alpana</i> drawn during the <i>Bhadhuli Brata</i> , a prayer for the well-being of father, husband, son.
<i>Bhorat phor</i>	: a filling stitch, the Romanian stitch.
<i>Bichhe par</i>	: the scorpion border.
<i>Bisa taga</i>	: the waist garland border; a <i>bisa</i> or <i>bichha</i> is a jewelled girdle.
<i>Bostani</i>	: a square wrapper for books and clothes.
<i>Bothi</i>	: a fish cutter; it is held in place on the floor with the soles of the feet, leaving both hands free to manipulate the item being cut.
<i>Buddhu</i>	
<i>Bhutum</i>	: the name of a folk tale.
<i>Chaka or chakra</i>	: wheel.
<i>Charchala</i>	: with four triangles or segments; see <i>aatchala</i> .
<i>Chatai</i>	: woven matting; the name of a stitch resembling matting; also known as <i>pati phor</i> .
<i>Chik taga</i>	: the name of a border; literally the necklet border.
<i>Chok par</i>	: the eye border.
<i>Dastarkhan</i>	: a spread for an eating place.
<i>Devata</i>	: deity.
<i>Dhaner shish</i>	: paddy stalk.
<i>Dheki</i>	: rice husker.
<i>Dhoti</i>	: white lower garment worn by Hindu males, also as a sari by widows.
<i>Dukkhu</i>	: the unfortunate.
<i>Dubba</i>	: a kind of grass.
<i>Gachh</i>	: tree.
<i>Gadla</i>	: roughly stitched quilt.
<i>Gatri</i>	: wrapper for books or other valuables; also known as <i>bostani</i> and <i>bayton</i> .
<i>Ghat</i>	: the bank of a pond or river.
<i>Gilaf</i>	: envelope-shaped wrap for the Quran.
<i>Golok dhanda</i>	: maze; the name of a motif; also known as <i>muchri</i> and <i>shostir chinho</i> .

<i>Gopis</i>	: village maidens; cow girls.
<i>Grafi taga</i>	: the name of a border.
<i>Guna</i>	: quality.
<i>Gut</i>	: the name of a border.
<i>Holud</i>	: turmeric; also ceremony before marriage when ground raw turmeric is applied all over the bride's body followed by a ritual bath.
<i>Jainainaz</i>	: Muslim prayer mat.
<i>Jati</i>	: betel cutter.
<i>Jhop taga</i>	: name of a border design; literally, the bush border.
<i>Kaitya</i>	: bending; the name of a stitch which appears to slope.
<i>Kajal</i>	: lamp black used as cosmetic; also to mark a dot on a child's forehead to ward off the evil eye.
<i>Kalam</i>	: pen.
<i>Kalka</i>	: paisley pattern.
<i>Kalpavrksa</i>	: the wish-fulfilling tree.
<i>Kanha</i>	: outer borders of a <i>sujni</i> .
<i>Kapa</i>	: two pieces of cloth measuring about 4' by 6' formerly worn by Muslim women of Chapai Nawabganj. One piece is worn as a <i>lungi</i> , the other is draped over the top.
<i>Kautar khupi</i>	: pigeon coop; the name of a motif.
<i>Khat kantha</i>	: kantha meant for use in a palanquin.
<i>Khejur chhori</i>	: date branch.
<i>Khol</i>	: cover.
<i>Kula</i>	: winnowing fan.
<i>Lagan</i>	: also called the <i>holud</i> . One of the rituals is the tying of a <i>rakhi</i> or string round the wrist signifying the marital union.
<i>Lep kantha</i>	: thickly quilted kantha, meant for use in winter.
<i>Lik</i>	: patterned running stitch, the effect of which resembles the Holbein stitch; patterns made using this stitch.
<i>Lik jhumka</i>	: <i>lik</i> pattern resembling <i>jhumka</i> or earrings.
<i>Lik lohori</i>	: <i>lik</i> pattern resembling waves.
<i>Lik phor</i>	: the <i>lik</i> stitch.

<i>Lik phul</i>	: <i>lik</i> pattern resembling a flower; known also as <i>shaita phul</i> in Rajshahi, <i>anarasi</i> in Jessore.
<i>Lik tan</i>	: an elongated version of the <i>lik</i> pattern.
<i>Lik tile</i>	: <i>lik</i> pattern resembling roofing tiles.
<i>Lohira</i>	: wavy; see <i>lohorī</i> .
<i>Loria</i>	: variation of <i>lohirā</i> ; see <i>lohorī</i> .
<i>Lohori</i>	: mutation of Urdu "lehr"; same as <i>lohirā</i> and <i>loria</i> ; name of kantha with a wave motif; but also applies to other kanthas using the thick, close running stitch associated with this type of kantha.
<i>Lungi</i>	: sarong-type garment tucked round body to hang from waist to ankle.
<i>Maachh par</i>	: the fish border.
<i>Makara</i>	: fish-crocodile figure associated with Hindu religious art.
<i>Mala taga</i>	: the garland border.
<i>Mama</i>	: maternal uncle.
<i>Mangal Charaner Alpana</i>	: alpana drawn when a marriage is fixed.
<i>Moi taga</i>	: ladder border.
<i>Motor dana</i>	: pea border.
<i>Muchri</i>	: same as <i>golok dhanda</i> and <i>shostir chinho</i> .
<i>Nakshi Kanthar Maath</i>	: the field of the embroidered quilt; the name of a narrative poem by Jasim Uddin.
<i>Nakshi pitha</i>	: rice-flour cake made with elaborate designs.
<i>Nolok taga</i>	: nose ring border.
<i>Oar</i>	: pillow cover.
<i>Palkir topor</i>	: palanquin cloth.
<i>Panch mala taga</i>	: literally, the five-garland border; same as <i>panch taga</i> .
<i>Panch taga</i>	: a threaded running stitch border.
<i>Panchomul</i>	: literally five-rooted; a five-pronged motif common in Rajshahi <i>sujnis</i> .
<i>Panja</i>	: the open palm; symbol among the Shias of the holy pentad, comprising the Prophet Mohammad, Hazrat Ali, Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and Ali's wife, and Hazrat Imam Hasan and Hazrat Imam Hussain, the children of Ali and Fatima and the Prophet's grandsons.

<i>Par tola</i>	: embroidered with sari border patterns.
<i>Pati phor</i>	: also known as <i>chatai</i> ; lit. the mat stitch.
<i>Phor</i>	: stitch.
<i>Phulkari</i>	: a form of embroidery common to the Punjab, worked with patterned running stitches.
<i>Phul par</i>	: flower border.
<i>Pipal</i>	: the sacred fig ( <i>Ficus religiosa</i> ); a species of banyan fig; the Bodhi tree is a <i>pipal</i> .
<i>Pipre sari</i>	: the name of a border pattern based on the <i>kaitya</i> , literally, ant line.
<i>Pirs</i>	: popular Muslim saints.
<i>Pocha</i>	: rotten.
<i>Puja</i>	: Hindu religious ceremony.
<i>Puranaghata</i>	: the full vase.
<i>Rajas</i>	: passion.
<i>Rath</i>	: carriage with wheels carrying icons of Vishnu.
<i>Rens taga</i>	: a threaded stitch border resembling a pattern of wrenches.
<i>Rumal</i>	: handkerchief.
<i>Sagar</i>	: sea.
<i>Salu</i>	: red material used for cotton padded quilt; also for <i>sujni</i> and cross stitch kanthas.
<i>Sarir par</i>	: sari border.
<i>Satadal</i>	: hundred-petalled.
<i>Satadal padma</i>	: the hundred-petalled lotus.
<i>Sattva</i>	: purity, truth.
<i>Shaitaphul</i>	: also known as <i>lik phul</i> and <i>anarasi</i> .
<i>Shamuk taga</i>	: the snail border.
<i>Sharia</i>	: Islamic code of laws.
<i>Shoja</i>	: straight.
<i>Shostir chinho</i>	: the swastika, also known as <i>muchri</i> or <i>golok dhanda</i> .
<i>Sijda</i>	: touching the forehead to the ground in Muslim prayer.
<i>Sujni</i>	: in Bihar, quilts similar to Bengal kanthas; in Bangladesh, specifically quilts made with red <i>salu</i> , worked with the back stitch.

<i>Surma dani</i>	: container for antimony oxide, used as eye cosmetic.
<i>Ta'abiz par</i>	: amulet border; name of border pattern resembling an amulet design.
<i>Taika</i>	: spindle.
<i>Tamas</i>	: darkness.
<i>Tejas</i>	: heat; fire.
<i>Triratna</i>	: three jewels.
<i>Uzu</i>	: ritual ablutions preceding Muslim prayer.

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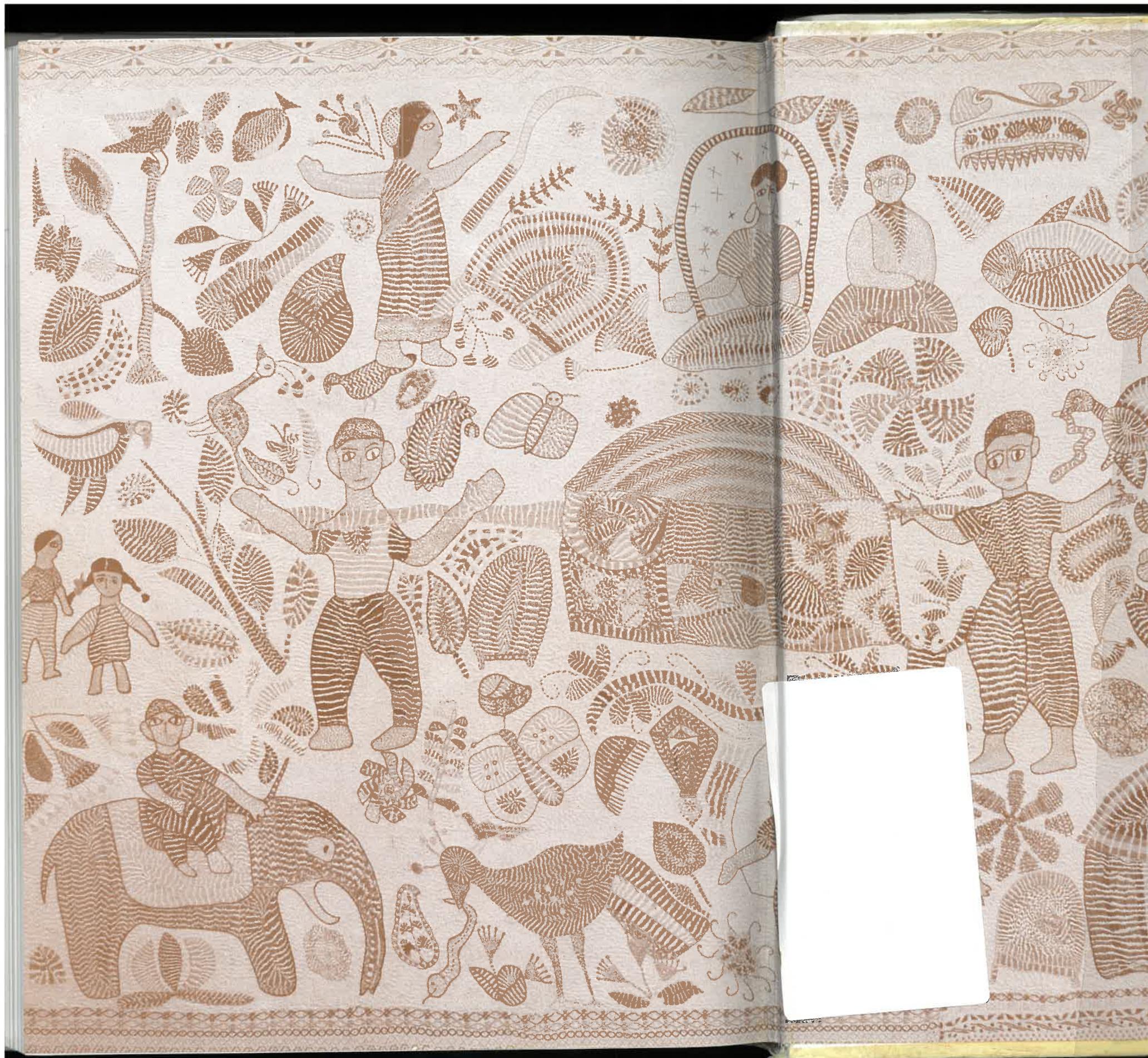
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**Niaz Zaman** is an academic and writer, who has widely published in Bangladesh and abroad on folk art. Her published work includes *Bosha Bhat to Biryani: The Legacy of Bangladeshi Cuisine* (Dhaka: UPL, 2012) and *Strong Backs Magic Fingers: Traditions of Backstrap Weaving in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Nymphaea Publications, 2010), which she co-authored. She has also contributed to the Philadelphia Museum of Art publication, *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: South Asia and Southeast Asia*, and *Sui Dhaga: Crossing Boundaries through Needle and Thread* (New Delhi: India International Centre and Wisdom Tree, 2010).

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In his foreword to the first edition of *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (1981), Syed Zillur Rahman commended the book as the "first of its kind on the traditional arts of Bengal." This revised third edition of *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* includes all the information contained in the earlier editions but also brings it up-to-date by including the rapid changes that have taken place in the kantha since its revival in the eighties. With the help of line drawings, black and white and coloured photographs, the book documents kantha stitches, motifs, border patterns, articles and styles. It provides a detailed analysis of the technique of kantha embroidery as well as a glimpse into the lives of the women of rural Bangladesh.

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